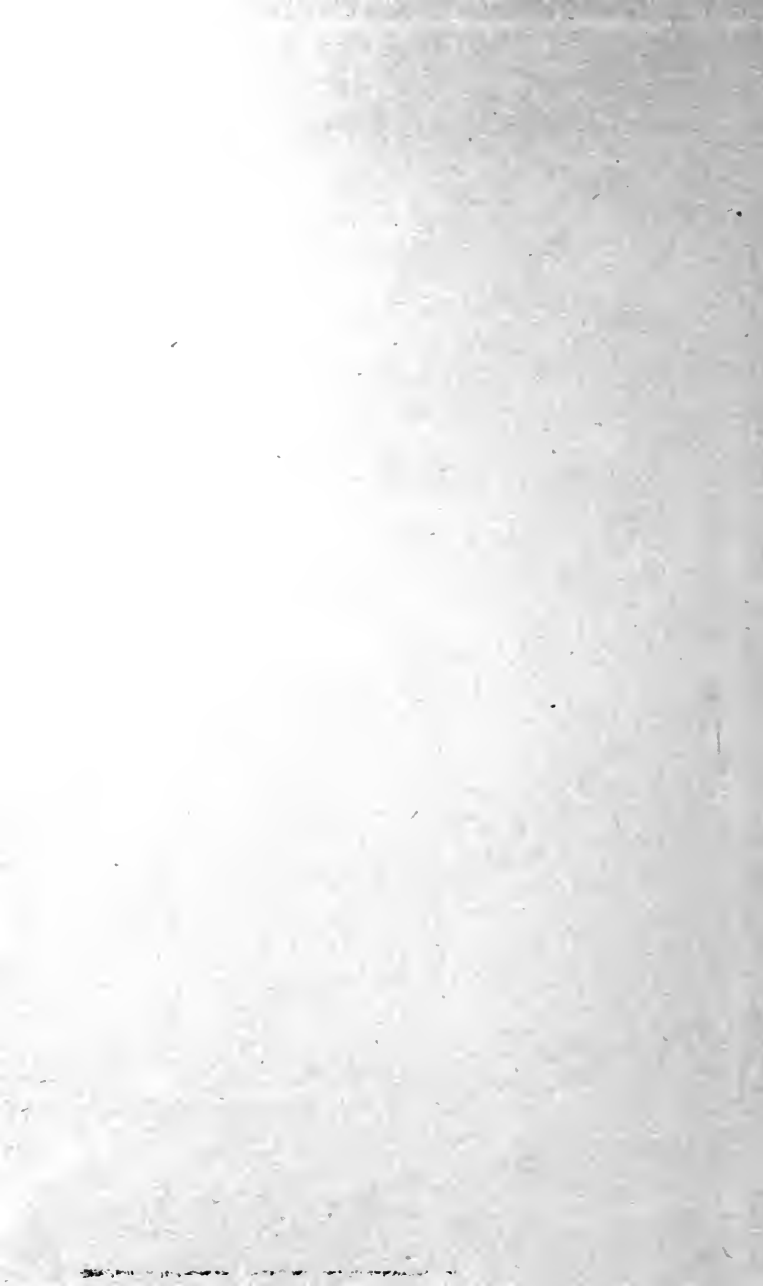


THE HANDSOME BRANDONS



By

KATHARINE TYNAN



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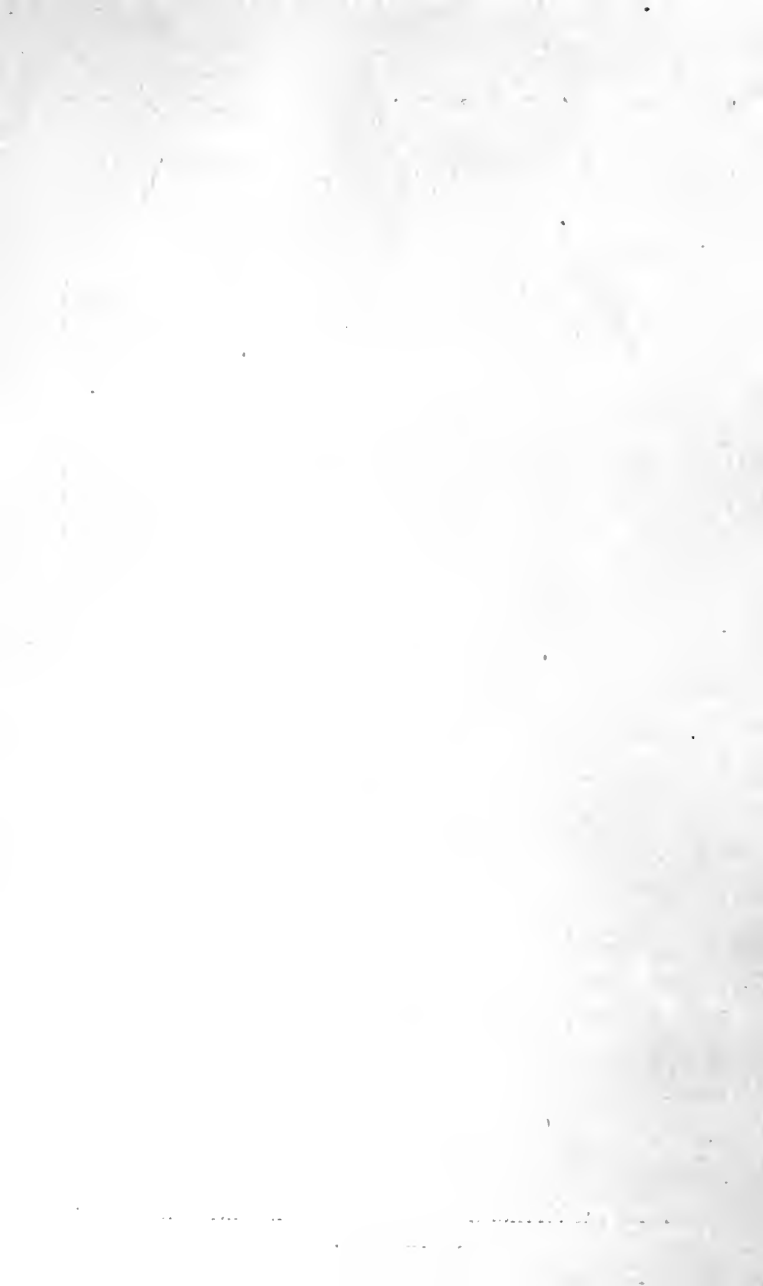
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THE HANDSOME BRANDONS



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"ESTHER WAS SITTING AT OONA'S FEET GAZING INTO THE HEART
OF THE FIRE."

THE HANDSOME BRANDONS

BY

KATHARINE TYNAN

Author of "The Dear Irish Girl" "She Walks in Beauty"
"Oh, what a Plague is Love!" &c.

[Katherine (Tynan) Hinkson]

WITH TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS BY GERTRUDE DEMAIN HAMMOND, R.I.

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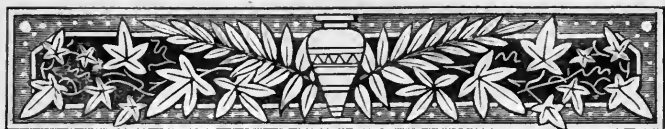
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THE HANDSOME BRANDONS.

CHAPTER I.

CASTLE BRANDON AND CASTLE ANGRY.



DON'T know whether Brandon Mountain was called from us or we from the mountain. The country people say that there were Brandons in the land before the mountains were made. Anyhow the mountains are likely to be there when there are no Brandons, so far as I can see. For how is a family to last when it has come to living on nothing, and the number of the family all told nine,—they being nearly all healthy and hungry people? At least there were nine before Pierce and Freda left us, and now there are seven. I foresee that one of these days, in spite of our vows to the contrary, we shall have to sell Brandon after all.

Now if some nice English lord would come along and buy it, to sell it would not be so bitter. Sometimes places do sell just for sheer beauty, and Brandon has nothing else. Time was when it had deer and grouse

and pheasants and wild little black cattle, to say nothing of hares and curlews and such small fry. But that was before the prosperity went from us to "the bad De Lacys", as they are called far and near.

I suppose they deserved their name in the old days when they won it. They were a persecuting, wild-living, hard-riding, hard-drinking race ever and always, and the people do not forget it to them that they burned chapels and flayed peasants at the cart-wheel in the old unhappy times that, thank God, are passed for ever.

The Brandons of Brandon and the De Lacys of Angry used in the old days to rule the county between them, though the Brandons, to believe the talk of the peasants and the more reliable county histories, were always good to their people. There was as much difference between them, say the country people, as between Brandon Hill and Angry Mountain.

Dear Brandon, that we all opened our eyes upon nearly as soon as we were born! Brandon always seems to take the sunshine. There, beyond the trees of our park, the blue peak lifts gloriously a smiling face to heaven. The gold of sunset crowns it, and the roses of the dawn fall first upon its head. Usually it is purple as a pansy, but if the clouds lie on it they are silver wisps finer than gossamer. The cold weather turns Brandon to bronze and gold. There are times when the slopes of it are as golden as a May pasture with the gorse in bloom, and times again when the drifts of heather are like fields of scattered rose-leaves.

Up there, where the little woods are, is like fairy-land. You are in a world of feathery aisles and arches. The ground under your feet in spring is dancing with the daffodils, or a little later with the wild hyacinths, and below them a carpet of the greenest moss. There are little trout-rivers, amber-brown, and always singing as softly as Oona, our nurse, used to sing her "Cusha Loo" to us to put us asleep. But for those same trout-streams often and often had we Brandons gone hungry.

Angry Mountain no doubt had its name from its looks. No one ever saw its head out of the clouds. When there is thunder it bellows terribly out of the wall of cloud on Angry. There is a great chasm in the side of it, "The Devil's Slice" they call it, which looks like the track of an avalanche. There are some who say that the hidden lake on top of Angry once emptied itself and swept a whole tract of boggy country before it down upon the villages and churches and farms and cabins. Angry Woods, that clothe the mountain base, have a bad name. People say that the kindly growths of other woods are sparse and thin there—that it is a place of gnarled old trees flinging themselves about in horrible attitudes—that it is damp and full of fungus—and that you never know when you may plunge into a bog-hole unaware, and be drowned there, and dried into a brown mummy, no one knowing your fate.

I expect most of those who have visited Angry Woods have gone there by nightfall, and with their hearts in their mouths, prepared for all manner of horrors. By

day the fear of Sir Rupert De Lacy and his bloodhounds is too great. Yet it would be quite in keeping with Sir Rupert's character, if he suspected an intruder in his woods by night, to let the bloodhounds loose. If some poor creature were torn to pieces by them, God help us, no one supposes that Sir Rupert would care; and, from the glimpse I once caught of him, I could believe any ill of him.

That was before I had lamed myself, and become the weak and ugly duckling of the handsome Brandons. There is a great chestnut tree that has grown through the walls of Brandon Abbey and brought down the solid masonry before it. I had my summer withdrawing-room in the chestnut, and nobody knew for a long time. When we were all in the woods, Esther and Hugh, and Donald, and the twins and I, it used to be my sport to disappear into my tree, where the others could never find me. Delicious it was—like a world under the sea—in the midst of green leaves. When the boughs hung up their lamps in spring, and the leaves had just shaken out their delicate fans, I used to feel as if the chestnut tree were fairyland, and too beautiful for anything of earth.

I used to read in the chestnut—I was always the reading one of the family—and used to love to hide in it while the others ran here and there calling me through the woods.

The road runs under the Abbey walls. There used to be a fortified wall running round Brandon to protect it

from the Irish chieftains, with whom afterwards we Brandons became such good friends, and even inter-married. The outer wall of the Abbey is an integral part of the old wall.

Well, as I was sitting high in my leafy house one day, I heard the sound of hoofs, and looked out to see who might be passing. There were two men, mounted, and at their heels three heavily-built, lumbering dogs, of a variety new to me. It was easy to guess that they were the bloodhounds of whom the country people stood in such dread.

Poor beasts! I should not have feared them myself half as much as I should have feared either of those men. They looked weary and footsore, being indeed of a breed too heavy to follow mounted men, and they were plodding along in the dust of the road and the hot sun, in a way that made me feel very sorry for them.

The rider in front was evidently Sir Rupert De Lacy. He was a big old man, with square relentless jaws, and the colour of gray granite. His hair was quite white and soft, such hair as might have belonged to an innocent, gentle old man. But Sir Rupert had eyes as ferocious as a wild beast's, with curious red lights in them which I should say were the lights of madness.

You will wonder how I saw all this, but as it happened Sir Rupert was riding bareheaded, and as he passed below my tree he pointed with his whip towards Brandon, and then laughed. My description of him owes nothing at all to fancy, though the others laughed at me about it,

and said it was only my romantic way to fancy I could see the fires in our old enemy's eyes.

Behind him a pace or two rode James Gaskin, Sir Rupert's steward—Sir Rupert's "devil", as I have heard him called. When a man has a mind to be wicked indeed Satan generally gives him tools to his liking, and if half the stories about Gaskin were true, he was as much more wicked than Sir Rupert as hell is wickeder than earth.

Gaskin was yellow and shrivelled, with a slight hump between his shoulders. He was grinning in answer to Sir Rupert's speech, and the grin showed teeth like fangs. I have never, indeed, seen a face in which evil was so terribly written.

Now as they passed below, Paudeen, my little half-bred Irish terrier, who was lying in my lap, must needs cock his ears and growl. The men did not hear it, but the dogs did, and growled in answer. Then the man, Gaskin, snatched from his pocket a horrible knotted whip, and, leaning over, lashed at the poor beasts that were doing no harm. Two of them shrank away whimpering. The third never flinched, but, lifting her tremendous jowl, faced the man with her black lips drawn back over her great teeth, and every hair on her bristling. I almost laughed aloud to see how Mr. Gaskin trotted forward to put a good space between himself and the brute.

Sir Rupert burst into laughter, a harsh and insolent laughter without merriment.

"Take care, Gaskin," he spluttered, "or Venom will pay off old scores on you one of these days. She hasn't forgotten that touch you gave her with the red-hot irons. She'll do you a mischief if she can. I'd confine my attentions to the other brutes if I were you."

So much I heard before the pair rode away out of hearing—a blot on the sunny day. It was seldom that Sir Rupert was seen in our part of the world, or indeed anywhere outside his own Castle of Angry, where they say that he and Gaskin drink together, and the peasants suppose that the devil himself often makes a third.

Somehow I guessed that he had come, casting his shadow on Brandon, that he might see the place he is bent on making his own. Alas! Sir Rupert is our one probable purchaser for our dear old home. Who else would want it?—all gone to ruin as it is, and stripped of all but its beauty. How often we have declared hotly that we would die ere he should have it, every one of us, from Aline to the youngest twin. But there he sits like a great gray old spider in his web, waiting and waiting till we are obliged to walk into it and he gobbles us and our poor Brandon up; and also the poor innocent people as well, in their wretched neglected mountain farms, who exist simply by reason of our forbearance.

Yet Oona, our nurse, remembers when Sir Rupert was a dashing young gentleman,—no one ever suspected that he would grow into an ogre.

"He had the bad drop, though," Oona will say, wagging her old head. "He was personable, but never to my

liking. Your grandmama, Miss Hilda, could never abide him, and wouldn't have married him not if your grandpapa had never been born. She guessed at the bad drop in him, dear young lady, though her ears had been kept from hearing what other people knew of him. Your grandpapa and he were like day and night, the one all goodness and brightness, the other with the black passions already marking his face."

Oona has told me over and over again the story of the love of the two men for my grandmother, an episode which has ruined us Brandons, and made Sir Rupert our implacable enemy.

Our grandmother's picture hangs in the boudoir, where Aline sits sewing or writing letters, or puzzling over wretched sums, poor darling! There are beautiful women nowadays, but women like our grandmother seem to have left the world altogether. . She must have been very tall; the folds of her white silk dress sweep away an endless distance in the picture. She has the neck of a swan, and a face, pure oval, with large melancholy eyes. Ringlets fall on either side of her exquisite face, and so innocent is her expression that she seems rather a creature for heaven than for earth. And indeed she did not live long after our dear father was born.

Grandpapa I can remember dimly, and can well believe that he was a handsome young man. Trouble had bent him, but there was no bitterness in the blue eyes—"eyes of youth", though youth had long left him. Even for Sir Rupert he had forgiveness at last, so true a Christian

was he, so humbly emulous of the Master he loved and served.

Why, Aline is exactly what he must have been at her age, except that Aline has borne the burden of us all so long that she has more lines of care round her dear blue eyes and her gentle mouth than ought to be there.

However, Oona says that grandpapa, good as he was, was as spirited a young gentleman as any of his compeers. No one could say of him that he was a milksop. He and Sir Rupert were ever something of rivals from the days they were boys at school together, and not in bookish matters. At games and sports they strove to outstrip each other. They were ensigns in the same regiment, and in the wars abroad none could say which was the better man in the field, though even then Sir Rupert had begun to have something of a bad reputation. Then the peace came, and the two young gentlemen swaggered it a while against each other in London drawing-rooms before coming back to their neighbouring patrimonies. There both fell in love with the same woman.

There was never any doubt from the beginning as to the way Aline Ashburton's heart had gone. But Sir Rupert would not believe it till she was actually married. Then he seemed to accept the triumph of his rival so generously, to all appearance, that our dear grandfather was full of remorse for the bad opinion he had held of him for long. Among the Brandon jewels is, or was, the collet of diamonds which Sir Rupert sent our grand-

mother. Inside the clasp is written, "To the Fairest", with the date of grandmother's marriage.

To make a long story short, Sir Rupert most wickedly wormed himself into grandfather's confidence. I can well believe that the generous heart was full of pity and tenderness for its unsuccessful rival. My grandmother, Oona says, never liked the friendship, but she could give no reason, except her feminine instincts, for her distrust of her old suitor, and those were not enough.

Ah! dear grandpapa was surely easily duped. Even when his pseudo-friend had betrayed him, no mist of suspicion ever gathered between those blue eyes and the world. In his latter days, indeed, he grew so much like heaven, so little like earth, that his righteous anger against Rupert De Lacy was lost in his profound pity for the sinner—such pity as an angel might have, who should realize all the horror of sin, and yet yearn over the soul for which Christ died.

Sir Rupert, even in those early days, had had something of a taste for science, and in the years that followed his disappointment in love he had devoted a certain amount of time to study in the laboratory which he had fitted up in his house.

Now there was, where Brandon estate wanders away to the mountain, a bit of unenclosed land, bare and poor, which up to that time had been regarded as waste. It was beyond Brandon walls, and nearly trenched on the lands of Castle Angry.

Well, Sir Rupert easily enough cozened my grandfather

out of it. There was water there, he said, and his cattle had but brackish bog-pools. My grandfather was for giving it to him, but Sir Rupert would not have it so, and the deeds were regularly made out, signed, and delivered. Then, too late, it was discovered why Sir Rupert wanted the land. Why, underneath its docks and dandelions it was one great seam of copper!

The copper mines made the De Lacys rich and the Brandons poor. When grandfather discovered how he had been cheated, and that there was no remedy, he began to sink for copper on his own account. People said that by means of paid agents Sir Rupert fostered in my grandfather what soon became a craze. How many thousands of pounds were poured into those wretched pits over there towards Angry I would not like to say. Sometimes copper was found in small quantities, placed there, people said, by Sir Rupert's agents. Such finds only set my grandfather to harder and more feverish endeavour, but they all ended in nothing. The one seam, and that apparently inexhaustible, was on Whinny Waste, as the No Man's Land was called.

While my grandfather was ruining himself and future Brandons, Sir Rupert was heaping up gold. But now the mines are no longer his, for a few years ago he sold them for a great sum to an English company. People say it was because he had a profound contempt for the business capacity of his grandson, a young fellow of whom we see nothing in this country, his youth having been spent with his mother's people in an English rectory. Indeed, Castle

Angry would have been no place for a young life to grow up in; and the young man may be like his father, about whose marriage Sir Rupert was so furious that he never laid eyes on him afterwards.

Anyhow, he must be the better for not having known, in the tender days of his youth, his terrible old grandfather and James Gaskin.





CHAPTER II.

WE BRANDONS.

WITHIN Brandon walls we are out of the world. We know nothing of the copper mines, except that sometimes we meet a shock-headed miner or two when we are on our way to the village. The sulphur-coloured washings enter Brandon river some miles away, and are carried out to sea. None of the smoke or smell of the mines is blown our way. In my heart I am glad that no copper was ever found on Brandon Mountain. I could not bear to see his beautiful blue and purple sides disfigured by the brimstone of the pit, whatever of gold it might mean to us.

We keep much within our walls, and fortunately we have no lack of room to stretch our legs. Our neighbours live at long distances from us, and though they would be kind, no doubt, because we are Brandons, we couldn't keep up with them in any way.

Why, we girls would have no clothes to wear at all if it were not for the stores laid away in oak chests and wardrobes upstairs, belonging to dead-and-gone Brandon ladies. Fortunately they made no shoddy in those days,

and the things have been safe in their camphor-lined dwellings from the moth and mildew. Brocades are there, fine yellow muslins that you could draw through a ring, woollens nearly as fine; and, as pretty as any of them, chintzes in bunched-up sacques belonging to a day when it was the fashion to be Arcadian.

We have adapted them with the aid of Mary Fahy, the village dressmaker, and a deal of trouble I often have to prevent her alterations being too drastic. A newspaper sometimes comes our way, and I know that it is the fashion for ladies nowadays to dress picturesquely, so I insist, greatly to Mary's discontent, that the precious old stuffs must not be cut, or too much pulled about, but only just pinched in here, or drawn out there, to fit us.

Not that she despises the beautiful material, which I have seen her fingering with rapt enjoyment. It is only that she hankers after the fashions ever since she paid a visit to Dublin, and, having a cousin a housemaid at the Castle, was permitted a peep at various festivities, with all the fine folk taking part in them. Mary's cousin, too, occasionally sends her a lady's paper, which serves to keep her ideas modern. However, I let her have her own way, with modifications, on the print frocks we wear in summer-time, to make up for my obstinacy about the old stuffs.

I feel that I am talking as if I were the head of the family. That is because Aline and Esther leave so much to my judgment. I am supposed to have the brains of the women of the family, which, if it is true, is only

fair, as the others have the beauty. I have been delicate since the fall that lamed me, pale and puny and insignificant, with light-coloured hair and washed-out blue eyes. Esther is like mother, but more beautiful—dark, with such vivid roses in her cheeks and lips, and such velvety eyes, and hair with coppery lights in it.

Brandon is a big house, four stories in the middle, with wings of three stories on each side. But the upper stories do not exist for us. They have so long let in the weather that we have given them over to the owls and bats. There is a deal of rubbish up there as well, and the children look upon it as a kind of Treasure Land, so that we have to keep the doors of communication safely locked, or we would never have our young pickles out of the rotting rooms.

I have sometimes gone there myself—of course I am to be trusted—and have leant my arms on a window-sill, and looked down at dear Aline toiling away in the corner of the rose garden, which she has kept from returning to wilderness. I have seen the twins, too, sitting there demurely under Aline's eye with their lesson-books open on their laps, two pattern little damsels; till suddenly in a moment, Aline having forgotten them over her roses, they would slip from the stone seat, and, holding each other's hands, would steal through the sweet-brier hedge, and run, run, till they were far beyond Aline's call; thus keeping tryst, naughty little girls, with Hugh and Donald, who were trout-fishing or rabbit-snaring in the woods.

Then my gaze would wander over the tree-tops to our dear Brandon, and on to Angry Mountain, fuming with clouds. I could see the towers of Castle Angry in the fissure the old bog-slide had left, there on its solid land, and the bog-holes and little rivers which surround it, so that it has to be approached by a causeway. When my eyes rested on Castle Angry, I would always shake my fist and frown, before withdrawing myself from my post of observation.

Oona is our housekeeper now, and as stiff with the Kates and Pollys of the village, who are our clumsy but willing little handmaidens, as though she had a great staff of servants under her. Oona never forgets what the Brandons were in old days, and ignores as much as possible the sad change that has come upon the family fortunes. Even if we have only a skinny chicken and a pig's cheek and greens for our dinner, they are served on silver, and the old table-linen, darned to the last extent, is always beautifully snowy and shining, as its texture deserves.

When we are alone Oona's manner to us is that of a nurse to her children, scolding often, petting again, and sometimes dictatorial. But before the little round-eyed servants she never forgets what is due to a Brandon, and her humility of manner towards us is no end of a jest, for we have always feared Oona so much more than she has feared us,—that is, we younger ones.

Only to-day I was sitting with Aline in the boudoir, to which we have brought our griefs and misfortunes

and peccadillos, ever since our dear mother died. I was just looking into the turf fire and prodding it up with a stick to make the sparks fly out of it, while Aline sat mending a pinafore belonging to one of the twins, and now and again smiling at me without speaking.

Suddenly there broke into the silence of the little room,—where the smell of yesterday's roses blent with the sharp turf-smoke,—a loud wail. Aline sprang to her feet, but I made a signal to her to be quiet.

"It is only Oona lecturing Polly," I said; "listen, and we will hear what it is all about."

"Indeed," wailed the voice, "'tis doin' me best I am. Amn't I wearin' them ould boots to plase you when me feet does be cut to bits wid them, an' the ould gazebo of a thing you've had me put on me head enough to break me heart? Sure I didn't know there was any harm at all at all in laughin' at the young gentlemen's jokes at dinner, an' they so arch I thought I'd have to run out of the room in screeches, so I did."

"You're a bad, ungrateful little girl!" says Oona, stemming the flow of words, "or 'tis glad an' proud you'd be to have boots on them dirty feet of yours, and a cap to cover your head, that's more like a haystack than a Christian girl's. Why, when I was young, and in service in this very house, the housekeeper would have given me the quare goin' over if I let on any more than the poker that I heard anythin' was said when I was waitin' table. 'Twould be as much as my place was worth."

"O, glory be to goodness, Mr. O'Connor, dear," cried the culprit, "sure we can't all be pokers, let alone that I can see them blessed childher just play-actin' at me to make me run out o' the room wid the laughin'."

"Childher! Am I to understand you as referrin' to the young gentlemen of the house?" we hear Oona say in the loftiest tones; but at this moment a diversion occurs, for the twins come racing along the corridor with a letter for Aline, and Oona transfers her lecture and little Polly to the housekeeper's room.

I always like to sit in Aline's room, there is such an atmosphere of quietness about her. Quietness and the sun are two things I associate with her. Is it always sunny in that little octagon room, or is it only an effect of the faded yellow silk panelling, and the old chairs and sofas in the same sunny colouring? One side of Aline's lantern-shaped room is indeed all window, and the upper panes filled with little golden shields, so that the room receives all the sunlight going. Except Aline's desk, which we have been told is genuine Sheraton, and worth a handful of money, the room has little furniture other than its straight-backed couches and chairs.

I am sure there are secret cupboards behind some of those panels. Often, when Aline has been writing her long letters to Pierce or Freda, I have gone creeping round the room, touching every knob of the curious carved roses that surround the panels of yellow brocade. But I have never succeeded in making a panel slide back, as I have fondly hoped to do. Again and again I have

desisted only when I discovered Aline's grave smile upon me.

You will wonder what I expect to find,—well, no treasure, certainly, that is, no money treasure, but perhaps a bundle of faded love-letters, or some such relic of a former occupant of this room, which would be real treasure-trove for me. Aline laughs at me for a romantic child, and says I shall never find anything, but still I hope.

Aline's letter is from Pierce. As she reads it I watch her face unobserved. It is lit up as though she were reading a love-letter. The love between those two is wonderful. We all understand, at least Esther and I do, how it is that Aline can refuse so heartlessly, year after year, that poor good Mr. Benson. Why, with her immense love for Pierce, and the overflowing of it for all us, unworthy, she has none left for a lover or a husband. Not but that we are devoutly grateful for Aline's celibacy, since she is happy in it, for what on earth would we do without her? Of course, she would make an exquisite parson's wife, beneficent without being meddling; but then she is more exquisite as our sister.

It is now five years since Pierce left us; he will be twenty-seven the 3rd of next June. Freda was twenty-five in February, and Aline has actually entered the thirties. Pierce was a tall, slim, active fellow when he went away, with Aline's golden hair and blue eyes, and Aline's sudden radiant smile in a serious face. Those two always rather held aloof from us, much as a very

devoted husband and wife might hold aloof from their grown-up children.

They used to walk together a good deal in the woods, and when Pierce would go fishing Aline would accompany him with her basket of mending or her book, and sit by him through the long hours of the day, while we young barbarians held our revels unchecked.

It must have been a great blow to Aline when Pierce went so far away. She has always had an air of loneliness since, as of one who has lost her mate. We have a way of going in couples in our family. Aline and Pierce, Esther and I, the twins of course, and those two dear boys who are always together. I don't know where Freda came in, but of course it mattered less, as she married so young, and was so absorbed in her Jim.

Pierce's going came about through Mr. Desmond's visiting the old country. Mr. Desmond is one of our personalities, and we are immensely proud of him, especially as he was born on Brandon estate. He is the son of a small tenant-farmer, and came into the world, one would say, with a very hard iron spoon in his mouth, and the same spoon quite ignorant of even wholesome stirabout. However, despite his humble origin, he has become a great man, a pioneer in dark continents, a letter-in of light on the hidden places of the earth. He is very wealthy and powerful, yet he is very simple, and as plain-living almost and plain-spoken as the peasants he sprang from. All his people are long dead, and the little house where he was born levelled to the ground;



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"THEY USED TO WALK TOGETHER A GOOD DEAL IN THE WOODS."



so it must have been a lonely home-coming for him when he arrived that May day now more than five years ago, and, walking into the wretched little "Brandon Arms", asked if he could have a bed and board for a few days.

I believe the people round about would have made a great fuss over him, if he had not quietly and shyly slipped through their fingers. He made nothing like a public appearance, but spent his time walking about by himself revisiting the places he had known in childhood. When he left, in about ten days after he had arrived, the only tangible signs that he had ever come were the magnificent cheques he sent the Rector and Father O'Sullivan, to be used as they thought well among the poor people.

But he carried off our Pierce. He had come upon him fishing, and had sat and talked with him the length of an afternoon, while the May-flies danced above the water, and Pierce filled his basket with beautiful silver trout.

The next day Mr. Desmond called, and sent in his card to Aline. The first we heard of him was that Aline had invited him to lunch, which consisted of Pierce's trout, cooked as only Oona knows how. He came two or three times afterwards, and then we heard that Pierce was to go to Africa with him. Pierce seemed fascinated by the man. So indeed did Hugh and Donald, whose noses at that time were not much more than above the table-cloth, but their scent was as keen all the time for danger and adventure as if they stood six feet in their stockings.

Aline said to us over and over during those days that it was a great thing for Pierce to have found such a friend as Mr. Desmond, and that he couldn't always be at home doing nothing, and that maybe he would become a great man himself, and build up the Brandon fortunes again; to all of which we gave a cheerful assent, though the tears were big in Aline's eyes. We had great food for speculation then about what would be the extent of Pierce's fortune when he came home, and how much it would take to put Brandon on its legs again.

However, all that proved quite futile. Mr. Desmond and Pierce had been together only a couple of years when, for some reason, they quarrelled and separated.

Meanwhile Aline has long worn that look of expectation, which means, we know, that she hopes any day may bring Pierce, or news that he is coming. Every month his room, the upper room of the octagon, is turned out, and afterwards Aline herself puts it to rights, setting all the things tidily just as Pierce left them, in the old untidy fashion. His rod and fishing-tackle, his pipes, his gun, his cricketing things, and all his old rubbish she dusts and sets back in their places. If Pierce walked in any day he would find the room ready for him. Every night, long after I am in bed, I know that Aline's light is burning, for our rooms communicate, and a long shaft of gold comes in under the door after my candle has been extinguished. I do not hear her moving about, and then I know that she is praying for Pierce.



CHAPTER III.

ANNAGASSAN RACES.

IT was the very month before Pierce left us, and brilliant April weather, when we played that prank which ended so disastrously for me, and the incidents of which I can never recall without a blush.

I was a pickle in those days, and ripe for all sorts of mischief, while Esther was then, as now, ever ready to follow where I led. As for the boys—did you ever know boys who didn't like forbidden fruit? As they say hereabouts, "Would a duck swim?" and the duck's attitude towards her native element was precisely that of Hugh and Donald towards any wild freak, whether suggested by themselves or by those who ought to have known better.

It was an exquisite day, more like June than April, and Pierce and Aline had gone for one of their fishing excursions together, taking a basket of luncheon with them.

"You'll be good children," Aline had said to us, "and not get into any mischief, and be in punctually for luncheon, and not give Oona any trouble."

We said we would be all she desired us; and she went off with her look of placid contentment. We really meant to behave very well, but we had not remembered then that it was the greatest day of the year for the whole country-side, the day of Annagassan Races.

Well, we remembered it soon enough—too soon—after Aline had gone; and at first we had no wilder idea than to ensconce ourselves in the ivy of the old abbey gable and watch the country people walking and driving by.

“There’ll be no one left in the village,” said Donald; “even the babies are going.”

“Barney Mc’Gee will be left,” said Hugh, “for he told me yesterday he was took with the rheumatiz fearful. ‘Yez wouldn’t be after wantin’ the little mare an’ the side-car,’ said he, ‘for if yez would, yez’ll be kindly welcome?’”

“I say,” I cried out on the impulse of the moment, “why shouldn’t we take Barney’s offer, and see the races?”

The boys stood up and jumped over the backs of their chairs to express their enthusiastic approval of the suggestion. Only Esther timidly asked what Aline would say.

“Say!” I responded disingenuously. “Why, what would she say? She never said we weren’t to go.”

“Let us ask Oona to give us our lunch to take with us,” said one of the boys.

“If you do,” said I, “Oona will smell a rat and spoil everything. I have threepence, and we can buy some gingerbread. Mind, the twins aren’t to know, or they will tell Oona.”

"Or they will make us take them. They're horrid cheeky little things," said twelve-year-old Donald, "and it would be ridiculous to be seen with a pair of kids like them."

We got off without Oona suspecting us, and made for the village. So far as sounds of humanity were concerned, it was silent as the grave, the place being given over to cocks and hens, and goats, and pigs, and cats, and ducks, and turkeys,—except that old Barney sat on his door-step wearing an expectant look.

"I thought yez'd come to-day, bein' offered the conveyance of the car an' horse. Sure young blood'll be young blood, an' even the dogs is off to Annagassan Races. Not so much as an intelligent baste for me to exchange a word wid until the people comes troopin' home in the cool of the evenin'."

The boys "yoked up" the old mare under Barney's supervision. She was a very Rosinante of a steed, and her harness, which must have been the first harness made, was broken in many places, and tied together with stout twine. The car was coated with years of mud, which hung down in stalactites behind, and the old cushions protruded their hair stuffing in every direction through the rags and tatters that pretended to cover it. However, Barney looked at it with such pride when it stood ready for us that none of us had the heart to find fault with the equipage.

Off we started, Donald driving, and with lurchings of the old mare to this side and that, which sent the fowls

flying in every direction, amid shrieks of indignation from the hens. However, when once she had got clear of the village, she settled down to a leisurely walk, which seemed likely to get us to Annagassan about sunset. When Donald tickled her with the whip she only flicked her tail as at an intrusive fly. This made us laugh, and at the sound of our laughter the old mare turned calmly on to a green patch at the side of the road and settled to make a hearty luncheon.

However, by dint of threats and coaxing we got her to a better pace in time, and reached Annagassan just after the second race had been run. We were all pretty hot and dusty, for we had walked up every hill, and we had assisted the mare over so many difficult places, that, but for the grandeur of it, as the boys said, we might as well have walked.

The boys had come off in their old homespuns for fear of arousing Oona's suspicions, but Esther and I had managed to creep out in our new pink gingham, which we weren't supposed to wear for a month yet. I thought Esther looked lovely, with the sparkle and glow in her dusky face, and her eyes, brown as a trout stream, made deeper in colour by contrast with her pink frock. Of course she had only cotton gloves and a cheap little black straw hat with pink roses in it, but I am sure she was far prettier than any of the fine ladies who presently passed us by with their cavaliers, on their way to see the horses take the big jump.

I wasn't a bit pleased to see that some of the gentlemen

looked at her as if they admired her very much. It vexed me even more than the smiles of some of the ladies at our equipage and ourselves. I felt rather the worse for the wear by this time, though Esther seemed to be irreproachably fresh; and the boys with their hair sticking out through their tattered straw hats, and their muddy boots and faded clothes, looked a pair of little scarecrows indeed.

People passed us by with an amused smile whom we should never have dreamt of admitting to Brandon in the old days, nor indeed to-day for the matter of that. There was that horrid Miss Pettigrew, the daughter of a very disreputable attorney, who is said to have done a good deal of dirty work for Sir Rupert De Lacy, and to have made his money by very questionable means indeed. Well, I saw this great flaunting peony of a creature look at Esther's unconscious face with a toss of the head, and an impudent, jeering smile, which made me furious for a moment, till I remembered that she was only Pettigrew's daughter, and could know no better. She took occasion to pass very near to us, flaunting her silks like any peacock, so near that we had to stand back a little to let her pass. There was a gentleman with her, and for a moment I included him in my glance of haughty indignation. But only for a moment.

He was quite young, and his face had a very bright expression, but just then he looked grave, almost angry, I thought, and it occurred to me that what Miss Pettigrew had whispered to him disgusted him not a little. Any-

how, as he passed quite close to us, he lifted his hat gravely, and I caught a glimpse of bright brown hair, rippled all over, despite its close cutting. Then they were gone.

I turned round, to find Mag Byrne, the beggar-woman, and one of the characters of the country, at my elbow. Mag had seen the little drama, and now spat out expressively.

“To think of the likes of her rubbin’ her dirty skirts against rale quality like yourselves, Miss Hilda dear! Why, I remember her father thankful to get a plateful of mate at the kitchen door of your own house, my dear, that’s a *shoneen* now, an’ his daughter trapesin’ about wid the officers from the barracks.”

I laughed at Mag’s indignation, and my own somehow disappeared. So Miss Pettigrew’s escort was one of the officers from the barracks. Well, he looked a gentleman, at all events, however he came to be in such strange company.

All the fine folk were in the carriage enclosure, or on the grand stand. We were out on the hill among the farmers’ carts and the dancing tents and Aunt Sallies; and Esther and I enjoyed the humour of it all greatly. Quite early in the day the boys had gone off to amuse themselves, but as they came back frequently to share their raptures with us, we were not anxious. Fortunately for them, the place was full of their friends, people who had lived on Brandon land for more generations than they or we could count, and to whom it was untold pride

and joy to "trate" the young gentlemen to all the fun of the fair. I offered them some of the threepenny-worth of gingerbread, but my offer was received with scorn. They had been royally banqueted on ham and chicken and ginger-beer and rhubarb-tart, and had seen the bearded lady and the giant and the dwarf, and were inclined to be rather contemptuous of us.

We ourselves were not a bit sorry when Mrs. O'Sullivan, Oona's cousin, came over to us and implored us humbly to share her home-made bread-and-butter, and the little pot of tea she had made by the aid of a spirit-lamp. We were very hungry by this time, and we were not proud with our own people. I am quite sure that the chicken and the champagne on the drags in the enclosure wasn't half so much enjoyed as was our repast out of Mrs. O'Sullivan's basket.

The people about us vied with each other in being kind and courteous to us. Indeed they were quite congratulatory to Annagassan Races for being honoured by our presence, though they abstained from looking at Barney's car and mare, while they detailed reminiscences of our grandfather's appearance, driving a coach and six, at these same races.

If there had only been our own dear good people, I could have enjoyed the races as heartily as the boys did, but somehow, as the afternoon went on and the bebies of fine folk passed and repassed us, I grew vexed and disquieted. It was not the supercilious glances of the ladies so much as the behaviour of some of the gentlemen. As

they passed they stared hard at us; and presently they would come back alone, or accompanied by other gentlemen, and walk past slowly, or stand at a little distance looking at us.

That was the worst, I said to myself crossly, of having a beauty sister, for of course they could not want to look at me. Esther had forgotten her misgivings, and was enjoying the day as thoroughly as the two boys. She had the air of rapture which very small joys have the power of awakening in her, and as she sat there radiant and smiling, with her red lips parted over her little white teeth, and her eyes shining, I couldn't wonder at people liking to look at her.

In other circumstances I should have enjoyed her enjoyment myself. But I had been gradually remembering that I was the really responsible person in this mad freak, that I was seventeen and ought to have known better, that Aline would have been so vexed if she could have seen these men, and so on. Conscience was pricking me so that at last, out of discomfort, I grew cross with Esther, and said to her viciously:

"Don't look so ridiculously happy. You are for all the world like Juliet in the play, and you are making those people stare at us."

Then I was quite sorry, for her dear face fell and her eyes clouded over.

"There, there!" I said repentantly. "I didn't want to frighten you;"—at which her face slowly brightened again. "After all, since we are here, there's no reason

why you shouldn't get all the enjoyment you can out of it."

Soon afterwards I had forgotten the disagreeable things myself in excitement over the great race of the day. The race lay between an English horse and a little mare called Brandon Biddy, that came of stock from my grandfather's stables, so that my excitement was at once a family affair and an affair of patriotism. Some one on the hill had brought us a little glass, so that I was able to watch the mare's green and white, as the horses and their jockeys spread themselves over the course like a many-coloured ribbon. The mare won by a length, and all at once I forgot myself and shouted as wildly as any one there, though, as everyone was shouting, it wasn't likely that I should be noticed.

However, when I discovered what I had been betrayed into doing, I felt myself turning crimson. I shut up the race-glasses sharply and took a furtive look round to see if anyone had observed me. The crowd on the hill-side was laughing and cheering and shaking hands all round; and some men were even flinging their hats in the air again and again in the exuberance of their delight. I was sure I had not been noticed, and I was able to turn to Esther and answer her "Oh, Hilda, isn't it splendid?" with a cheerful affirmative.

But just then I saw, standing quite near us, the gentleman who had been with Miss Pettigrew earlier in the day. His face was full of amusement, and it flashed upon me in a minute that he had been watching my

ridiculous capers. I was furious, and looked so, I suppose, for his amused look gave way to one of such gentleness and deprecation, that I felt my anger quite giving way. Though I was sure that I should never cease to blush for having appeared so ridiculous.

However, just then the boys came up.

"They're saddling for the last race," cried Hugh, "and we'd better be making our way out of this crush, or we won't get home till midnight with the old mare. We'll see the last race just as well from the Upper Road."

We agreed, and I was delighted with the boy's foresight, for I didn't want to be coming through the gap side by side with all the carriages and drags. So we turned our Rosinante around, and came down from the hill and across a field, and through the gap, where half an hour later there would be such a tremendous struggle for precedence.

The mare was eager for her stable and trotted briskly enough over the grass fields to the road. We halted to see the last race run, and then we turned from the Upper Road into a quiet by-road which would take us to Brandon village by a slight detour. By taking it we should escape the crowd, and as we turned off the high-road and caught in the distance already the shouting and tumult that showed the people were trying to get first through the gap, I heaved a deep sigh of relief. Then I turned to the others with a smile.

"Well," said I, "we've had a delightful day and no harm done. All's well that ends well!"

But just at that moment there came from the Upper Road a blast of a horn, followed by the clatter of hoofs. Barney's mare started and flung herself almost back on us; then she was off like the wind. Barney had always said that she had a touch of the racer. Perhaps the events of the day had wakened it in her. Anyhow the noise of the drags was too much for her, and she was off.





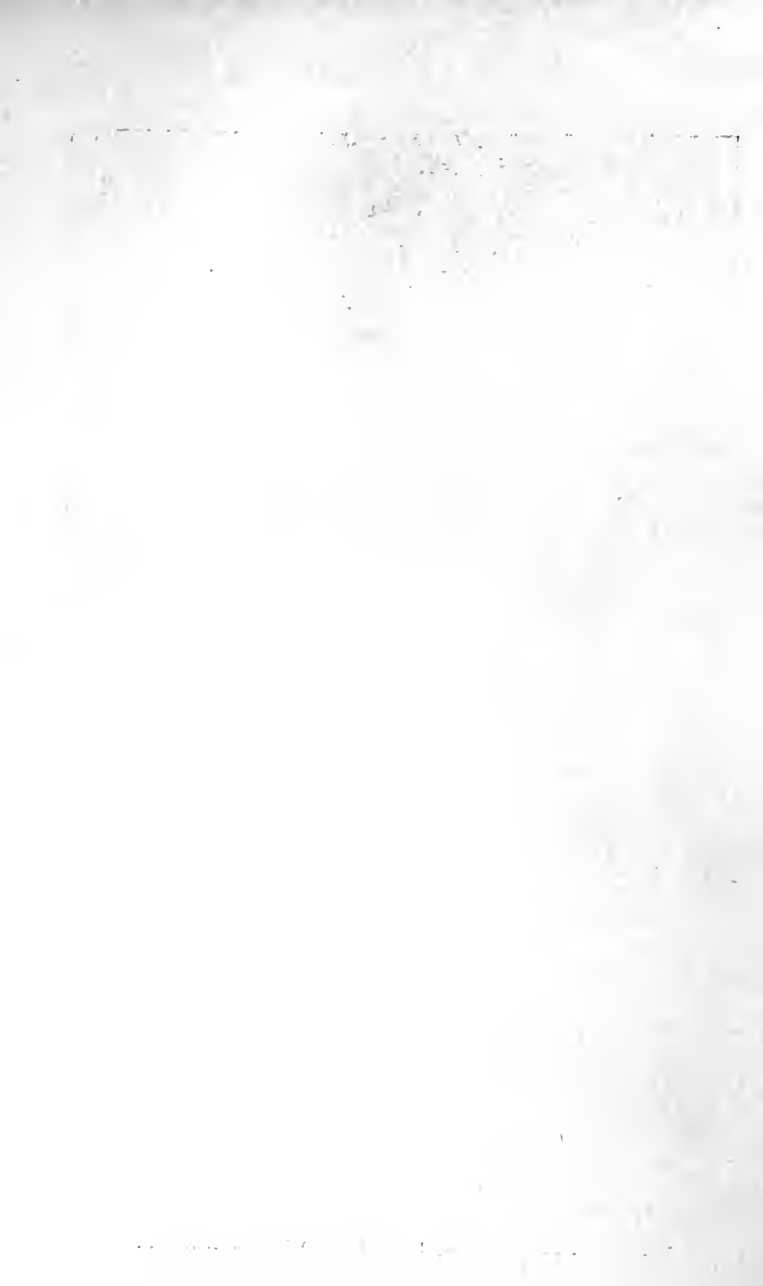
CHAPTER IV.

I PAY THE RECKONING.

I JUST remember the boys shouting at us to hold on and sit steady. We didn't require that instruction, for every country-bred girl knows that the only thing to do when a horse bolts, is to keep quiet and do nothing. I gripped my side of the car and watched Hugh, who was driving beside me, fling himself half-way across the car in his effort to keep a tight grip of the reins. The wretched car was swinging from side to side, and I caught a glimpse of Esther, rather pale, holding on quietly to her side as I was doing to mine.

I wondered at the calm of my own mind. "If we meet nothing," said I, "and the harness holds, we are safe enough, for it won't take long to tire her out." On the other hand, if the harness did not hold, or we met anything coming in the opposite direction, some of us would get hurt. I watched the flying hedges as the car flung us high and low, with an absolute calm that looked neither before nor after. I hope God always sends such courage when one really needs it. So the mad flight went on in absolute silence as far as we were concerned.

But of course the wretched harness could not stand





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"MY POOR LITTLE GIRL, I AM AFRAID YOU ARE HURT!"

the strain. Hugh suddenly fell back towards us with a broken rein in his hand. The mare gave a tremendous leap to one side. There was a heap of stones on the side of the road, obligingly left there for our misfortune by Mullaly, the road contractor. In a moment she had kicked herself free of her harness and was off again, but I saw nothing of this, for I was lying at the bottom of a deep ditch, with my foot turned under me, and I don't know how many newts and young frogs walking about my pink frock.

I am not the fainting sort, but the fall stunned me. When I came to myself I had my head on somebody's shoulder. I looked up into the face bending over me, and saw a pair of gray eyes full of honest concern for me. It was the young man who had been Miss Pettigrew's escort. He was bathing my face with a silk handkerchief dipped in water someone had brought. I looked at him for a minute and tried to sit upright, but I only succeeded in uttering a sharp cry.

"My poor little girl," he said with pitying tenderness, "I am afraid you are hurt. Where is it?"

"My foot," I gasped; and I felt that I was half-fainting again with pain.

"Keep quiet. It is probably sprained," he said quickly. "Let me look at it."

I heard him call to someone for a coat, which he arranged under my head. Then I remembered.

"Are the others all right?" I cried.

"Here they are to answer for themselves," he said;

and then I saw that the boys and Esther were standing by, with very frightened faces, all plastered with mud and dirt, but evidently none the worse for the accident.

"We are all right, darling," said Esther, who was crying, "only alarmed about you."

"I am going to hurt you, my poor little girl," said the strange young man, "but you must be brave, and I will make you easier for the journey home."

I felt him cutting away my shoe and stocking. It was agony every bit of it, but I endured it, only saying my prayers, as I had seen the peasants do when they suffered. Then I felt him binding my ankle about with something cold and wet, that seemed to relieve me a little; when he had finished, he bent over me again, and I smiled faintly at him.

"You are very good to me," I managed to say.

"Good to you!" he echoed. "I wish I could save you the horrible suffering I know it is. I hope it is no worse than a bad sprain, but a doctor must see it immediately you get home. But how to get you home, that is the question?"

"I'll run to the cross-roads," volunteered Donald, "and bring Larry Brady's ass and cart. The ass will travel as slow as you like, and she can lie full-length in the cart."

"Right, my boy! If they can send a feather-bed and pillow, so much the better."

Donald was off like a shot.

"I hope you have not far to take her," he said, turning to Esther.

I saw she was about to tell him, and I darted a warning glance at her which she understood.

"Not very far," she said, haltingly.

"To Brandon village," he asked, "or one of the farm-houses yonder? I don't think this road leads anywhere else, except to Brandon itself."

Now I was vexed at his taking us for peasants or farmers' daughters, though I didn't want him to know we were Brandons. So I took the words out of Esther's mouth.

"Yes, to Brandon village," I said, which was true enough, for we had to pass through the village, and some of us would have to explain to Barney the accident to his property. That was worrying me too, for we could ill afford to make up the damage.

I closed my eyes after that and said nothing, for the throbbing pain in my ankle made me feel exhausted. Through my closed eyelids I could feel the pity in the kind strange eyes that were watching me. He was so kind that I felt I could forgive him not only for not recognizing us at once as Brandons—which I should have hated him to do—but for having walked with that Pettigrew creature. Evidently she had not told him who we were. Whatever her jibe had been, it had not told him that we were Brandons,—the proudest and most impoverished race within the four seas of Ireland.

My thoughts went from one thing to another, and presently grew hazy and dull with continued pain. Then I became aware that the ass-cart had arrived,

with Mrs. Brady as well, full of lamentations and wirrasthrues. I was very much afraid she would give us away to the stranger, but he was so engaged looking after my comfort that I don't think he heard a word she said. It was he who lifted me into the little cart, so gently that my ankle scarcely hurt. As he lifted me, I saw his fine bay horse fastened to a gate. He must have been riding from the races and witnessed our mishap from the Upper Road.

He laid me down gently on the soft feather-bed. As he bent low to do it, his face almost touched mine. "Good, brave little girl!" he whispered. Then he turned to the others.

"Who is going to lead the ass?" he asked.

"I," said Hugh. "I," said Donald.

"You had better lead, being the oldest and wisest," he said to Hugh, with a smile; "and take care you do not jog her. Fortunately the road seems pretty level."

He lifted his hat, and I thought I detected a wistful look in his eyes. I am sure he wanted to know who we were, and to ask if he might hear how I progressed, but nobody said anything. He stood watching us as we moved off slowly, and when we had gone quite a long way, before the road turned, Hugh looked back, and said:

"Your friend is watching us still, Hilda." And then added in his emphatic way, "I call that no end of a good fellow!"

I said nothing. I was thinking dreamily that the

stranger had never once looked at Esther, always at me. I wondered who he might be. Anyhow we were never likely to see or hear of him again. We never went out anywhere we were likely to meet him, and if he was, as Mag Byrne had suggested, an officer from the barracks, he would presently leave with his regiment and go out into the wide world, where even friends find it so hard to meet.

But here we were at last at Brandon hall-door, and Aline was running down the steps. Esther had gone on before to explain things to her. I saw that Aline looked very much disturbed, but when her eyes met mine they held nothing but love and pity.

Well, they sent for old Dr. Devine, who came and examined my sprain. He was very grave about it, for it was no sprain at all, but a compound fracture. After that I was ill for a long time, enduring such pain and fever with my hurt—for there were complications—that it wore me to skin and bone. Then Aline sent for a Dublin specialist, for Dr. Devine was very old, and not altogether to be trusted. Indeed, the Dublin doctor found things so bad that a bone had to be broken again and re-set. However, after months of it I was carried downstairs, hollow-eyed, and the ghost of my old self. But I had plenty of cause for gratitude, for I had very narrowly escaped being a permanent invalid, though, when I could walk about, I was a little lame, as the Dublin doctor had feared I should be for a long time, and I have never been quite my old strong self again.

However, they have all been so good to me, that even in my misfortune there is sweetness. It was quite a novelty in our strong family to have someone to wait on, and I believe the boys and the twins were delighted beyond telling in carrying my footstool or fetching a shawl or pillow for me, or, when I went with them on their expeditions, carrying a little bundle of rugs and wraps with which I should be made comfortable when we sat down to picnic among the harebells, or in a sunny hay-field sloping to the river.

I think it was a comfort to Aline to have me to distract her mind when Pierce went away. Once, after a long time, I said to her that I was sorry for the escapade which had ended so disastrously.

"Poor little Hilda!" she said. "You have had to pay heavily for a bit of childish folly;" and she stroked my hair in her exquisite way.

Yet I think that if all had ended well that day Aline would have been very angry with us, for she is so proud; and lying quietly so long, I seemed to have grown up suddenly, so that I understood how she might wince under the incidents that had seemed glorious fun to us younger ones.

As she sat beside me another day, feeding me with little bits of a peach, I asked her a question which had been in my mind.

"Aline," I said, "where does all this come from—the peaches and grapes, and game and wine? And how did you pay for the Dublin doctor for me?"

She bent down and kissed me again.

"I sold the collet," she said quietly.

"Sir Rupert's collet!" I almost shrieked. "But it was your own—the one beautiful thing you had! Grandmother left it to you herself."

"I had so much more right to part with it," she said, looking at the fruit she was peeling, not at me.

"Why didn't you sell some of the other jewels?" I asked, almost indignantly.

"Family jewels, dear, which must remain Brandon property. They are for Pierce's wife some day. Besides, I didn't care for the collet. That man's gift couldn't be of good omen."

After that I said nothing more, though I cried with sheer love and gratitude, when Aline had left me, to think I had such a sister.

During my illness I had often thought of the gentleman who had been so kind to me that day. When I was at last out-of-doors and able to sit in the rose-garden near Aline, I asked Hugh, who was sitting by me mending his fishing-tackle:

"Do you know, Hugh, what regiment is quartered in Annagassan Barracks just now?"

"No. What do you want to know for?" looking up at me in amazement. "You don't know anyone there."

"Well, I think the gentleman who was so kind the day I got hurt was probably an officer there."

"Oh, is that it? Well, if he was, he's gone, for there is a new regiment just come in. The other's gone to

India. Say, Hilda, weren't we duffers not to have asked him to call? I thought it was pretty queer of us, but it wasn't my place, you know."

"We were rather duffers," said I.

"I expect he'd have been glad. He looked a right good sort, and a gentleman. I could have put him up to a lot of things, and Donald and I want some male friends. Of course you girls are all right, but a man wants men," said Hugh, wisely.

"Well," said I with a little sigh, "it's no use talking now. I don't suppose he'll ever come back again."

"I should jolly well think not. I wish I had his chance. Why didn't old Desmond take a fancy to me instead of to Pierce?"

"Maybe he will," said I consolingly. "Some day when he has established Pierce he will send for you."

Somehow after that, when I began to write stories out of my head, the hero always was brown-faced and gray-eyed. He had always a ripple of close-cut brown hair, and a humorous mouth, and such a kind expression, when anyone was in trouble. He must have grown rather monotonous to Esther, my only audience, who will listen entranced for hours while I read my effusions.

She is a most inspiring audience. She reads her own romance into everything, and to see her flushed cheeks and wet, eager eyes she might be listening to *Romeo and Juliet* rather than to my poor little tales. It is the worst of Esther, that she has so little discrimination. Give her a love-story, and she doesn't mind whether the

scene is Kerry or Mantua, the writer Hilda Brandon or William Shakespeare. "Oh, it is lovely!" she cries all the same, and thirsting for more. If Esther ever falls in love may I be there to see!

Still she found out my hero.

"Why, Hilda," she said one day, "Geoffrey Strafford is exactly like the young officer who helped you after Annagassan Races; and so was Hilton Beresford and Jack Vandaleur, and ever so many more."

"You think so?"—with exaggerated surprise. "You must only fancy it, for if there is anything I pride myself on it is the originality of my characters; and I am sure those three you mention are not a bit alike."

"Perhaps not," she said with a little puzzled line between her brows. "Yet I thought they all *looked* alike. He was quite nice enough for a hero anyway. You remember him, Hilda?"

"Yes," said I disingenuously; "but you don't remember very clearly things that happened when you were in such suffering, you know."

"Of course not, you poor darling! I don't suppose you really saw him a bit. Still your heroes are very like him."

After this I tried a course of fair heroes, but somehow I didn't succeed with them so well. That is the worst of having such limited experience as we have. I can't get my own brothers to stand for their portraits, and outside them I know only Dr. Devine and Mr. Benson, and the people in the village, and none of those are at all heroic.



CHAPTER V.

FREDA.

A LINE always said that it was providential that Freda should have married, and married a rich man. She told Freda so herself one day, I remember, for I was in the room, but Freda only put out her red mouth, and said that she couldn't see things in that light at all, that she could have endured poverty with the best of us, and as for Jim's being a rich man, well, she would have married him if he hadn't had a sole to his boot, or a rag to his back. Poor, dear, dear old Jim, it was as hard to imagine him shabby, as it is now to imagine Freda back again in our ramshackle life. He was always so fresh and trim, with such immaculate linen, and clothes that even we rustics felt were a marvel of the tailor's art. What a dear, jolly, open-handed fellow he was! and how little any of us could have believed that he would only live two years, and leave Freda a young widow at twenty. But, after all, as Esther says, Freda was perfectly happy for two years, and that is not given to many people. And then, too, she has her little son, who is such a dear little boy,—or was when we saw him two years old,—that no mother could be very unhappy possessing him.

Jim had been visiting old Mrs. Doyne at the Valley House when he and Freda saw each other and fell in love at first sight; and that, says Esther, is the only possible love. I remember Freda that summer. She used to wear a green muslin that had once belonged to our grandmother, and she looked lovely in it. She was wearing it the very first day she ever saw Jim.

Mrs. Doyne was an old friend of mother's, and while she lived we used to go a good deal to the Valley House. Her only son Alick was in India, and she was very lonely, and liked to have us about her. I think she hoped that Alick would come home, and that he and Freda would make a match of it, for Freda was her favourite.

We hadn't the least idea that she had a visitor that June afternoon when Freda and I set out to have tea with Mrs. Doyne, I looking forward agreeably to the strawberries and cream and the tea-cakes, and the delicious rich tea in the faded sweet-smelling drawing-room at the Valley House.

Freda could never bear to be shabby like the rest of us, and I remember that when I came out of the house and found her waiting for me on the lawn in the sun, I thought she looked as fine as heart could desire. She was wearing her sailor hat, and had tucked a large bunch of dark Camille de Rohan roses into her belt; and the green frock, with her pale face and red lips, and all her little golden rings of hair like a baby's, was charming. I was rather down at heel, and my dress was crumpled, and I swung my hat by the string as I walked. I dare

say I made a most effective contrast to Freda, who was so spick and span and fresh and cool, though it was very hot weather.

Well, we sat blinking like cats in the big shady drawing-room after the brilliant sun outside, and then dear old Mrs. Doyne came in and kissed us, and, having made us sit near her, kept stroking Freda's hand absently, as she had a way of doing.

She had asked after everybody, and had rung the bell for tea before she came to what was quite an exciting piece of news for our corner of the world.

"I have a young gentleman staying with me, my dears, a friend of Alick's, and such a nice lad."

"Oh, Mrs. Doyne," said I, "but isn't he a bother, and how do you manage to keep him amused?"

"Well, you see, my dear, the poor young fellow's not very strong. He's home on sick leave, and he promised Alick he wouldn't return without bringing him news of his old mother. And so when he was kind enough to come all this long way to keep his word with my Alick, and seemed to find the country so beautiful, and the summer here so mild and sweet, I could do no less than ask him to stay—could I, Hilda, my dear? And would you believe it?—he seemed quite pleased to be asked."

"And why shouldn't he be?" I said. "It's easy enough to be happy in this house. Only I was thinking of an ordinary man. Sons and brothers are different, of course; but one always thinks a man must be wanting to do something. Of course if he's ill it makes all the difference."

"He's scarcely ill now," said Mrs. Doyne. "He says he finds the air here wonderfully curative. And I assure you Susan and I enjoy cosseting him. It's almost like having Alick to pet again; though, of course, Alick, dear fellow, was never ill, and no subject for our port-wine jellies, and beaten-up eggs which Mr. Hazeldine seems to enjoy so much."

"What does he do all day?" asked Freda.

"Oh, he's not at all troublesome, my dear. He likes to lie in the sun, with his cap over his eyes, and soak in the air, as he says. Or he reads and talks to me when I am ready for him, or knocks the billiard balls about, or takes long walks with Rory. Poor Rory hasn't had such good times since his master went away. Oh, by the way, I thought of making a little picnic and asking you young people. Just ourselves, you know, to Inver Waterfall. I could have the barouche out for any one who didn't care to walk, and the donkey-cart could take over the hampers."

Of course we were rejoiced, and said so. Just then the door opened, and Mrs. Doyne's visitor came in. He evidently had expected to find no one but her, and at first I think he could hardly make us out in the dark room, though Freda's gown made a radiance in her corner, as if the sun were looking in through green leaves.

I thought him pleasant-looking at the first glance. He would naturally be bronzed, and a little brown was already stealing over the pallor of recent illness. He was freckled, and smiled pleasantly, showing a row of

white teeth, as he was introduced to us. Then he went over to Freda's corner and sat down beside her, and in a few minutes they were talking quite like old friends. I watched them while I drank my tea. He was leaning forward looking at Freda as he talked. She listened with a slightly averted head, as was her way, and her quietly dreamy smile.

Afterwards he went out into the garden, and Mrs. Doyne and I walked together while the other two somehow fell behind. The dear old lady talked on about her roses and her pet doves, and her dairy, and her dear Alick, while she was filling a little basket with strawberries for us to take to Aline. After a while we found a shady seat and sat down.

"Did it strike you, my dear," asked the old lady suddenly, "that Mr. Hazeldine seemed quite taken with your sister?"

"I should be surprised if he weren't," said I. "Do you know, Mrs. Doyne, I admire Freda so much? I think in that green frock she is exactly like a lily of the valley—don't you?"

"It is very pretty of you to think so, dear Hilda, and she is indeed very fair and sweet."

She sighed a little, and I guessed it was with a faint fear that her Alick might be too late to appreciate that sweetness.

"He seems a good lad," she went on, "and my boy thinks a great deal of him. He has made a very fine position for himself for so young a man, and his father,

Sir John Hazeldine, is a very rich man, a London banker, my dear, though of course he has other sons than this one."

Now this didn't interest me much, for I couldn't look as far ahead as Mrs. Doyne. Any one with eyes in his head must admire Freda, but admiration and love are different things. And I didn't care a bit about Mr. Hazeldine's prospects. I was such a goose in those days that I believe the fact of poor Jim's prospects being so rosy rather diminished my interest in a possible romance.

"That's pleasant for him," said I, standing up and opening my ragged parasol. "But now, dear Mrs. Doyne, I think we must find Freda, and be thinking of getting home."

We found the pair calmly strolling up and down the avenue of chestnuts by the trout-stream, which we used to call the Lovers' Walk, and I thought Mr. Hazeldine looked as if we had come too soon.

Well, the picnic occurred a day or two later, and after that Mr. Hazeldine seemed to be always coming over to us, or a party of us going to the Valley House for tennis, or a gipsy tea, or something or other. But from the beginning there was never any doubt about Mr. Hazeldine and Freda.

He didn't pretend to think of anybody but her. Indeed his adoration was so embarrassing that we were always glad when, after a few minutes, they would go mooning off down the sycamore alleys, or round the pond at the garden-foot, and relieve us of their presence. It

made the boys very contemptuous of poor Jim. Hugh used to say that if he thought he could ever look like that he'd hang himself; and as for Donald, his scorn for the man who could prefer the company of a girl to a man's company—by which, I suppose, he meant his own—was something too crushing.

Freda looked lovely in those days, paler even than usual, but somehow as if there were a light burning inside the whiteness.

I think it was really only about four weeks from that day Freda and I went to the Valley House that Jim spoke, but we thought it very long. It was the first love affair we had had in the family, and it embarrassed us all.

I'm sure Aline and Pierce did their best to be very business-like when Jim broke in on them one day and announced that Freda had accepted him, and he wanted to be married before the summer was over. But there was no real difficulty in the way. Mrs. Doyne knew all about Jim, and after he had gone over to England to see his father and mother and tell them about Freda, they wrote saying how sorry they were not to be able to take the long journey to see their son married, but that they looked forward to seeing Freda afterwards, which seemed very satisfactory, though the letters read rather stiltedly. That might be, however, because they were English people. I had a kind of idea at the time that Lady Hazeldine resented her favourite boy being married by a wild Irishwoman. However, that may have been fancy, but

we thought it a little odd that none of them came to the wedding.

Jim came back from London that time simply laden with the most beautiful gifts, not only for Freda but for the smallest child in the house, and for Oona, and the little maids, and some of the poor people about, whose acquaintance he had made.

We all agreed that Jim and Freda were well matched, for she was always good at giving, though her few pretty things were dear to her.

We received Jim's gifts rapturously, but he would say laughing:

"Don't thank me. Wait till you see the pretty things I'll send you from India, when I have Freda to help me choose them."

And Freda looked on at his giving and his promises with a grave delight, as if he were fulfilling wishes of hers which had long been denied. It was really such a wonderful thing to have money going round in the family at last.

Dear old Mrs. Doyne gave Freda her trousseau. It was so dear of her, for we all felt that the marriage destroyed her long-cherished hopes. However, it was fortunate that Freda didn't wait for Alick, for he married the following year, and not long after that our dear old friend died, so that Alick will hardly ever again come to the Valley House.

Well, Jim and Freda were married one beautiful September morning, and Esther and I were bridesmaids, so

fine in some beautiful gauzy silk stuff which Jim had brought us from London. We were all rather miserable, for Freda was going away so far, and she cried a few tears herself too, though she couldn't help looking as if she were in a seventh heaven all the time.

But, as Aline said, it was happiness to know that Freda was safe from the poverty and the fear of having to leave Brandon, which is the lot of the rest of us. I know that Aline's heart is troubled for all her chickens, and in addition to the comfort of feeling that one was safe, I think she had a little hope that Freda, if she was going to be rich, would help with the boys and the twins, for how they are to get their schooling, much less be provided for later, Heaven knows.

I remember the last thing I whispered to Freda was:

"Be sure and tell me if they have gold plate every day at the Hazeldines'"—for Esther and I had been romancing about the wealth of Jim's people.

And she laughed,—though her eyes were full of tears,—and said she would be quite sure to tell me.

But she never did, though she wrote long letters to us all, and kept sending us all kinds of useful and beautiful things. She said very little indeed about Sir John and Lady Hazeldine, but we thought it was because she was so very full of Jim, for her letters were nothing but Jim, Jim, Jim, and how good he was to her, and what a happy woman she was. And so it was after they went to India.

Then the little boy was born, and we were so excited about him, at least we girls were, for boys can't be ex-

pected to care about babies; and Freda sent us a picture of him when he was eight months old, with his Indian nurse, and we thought he was the quaintest and sweetest little thing we had ever seen.

Alas!—poor Freda!—that all her palaces should have crumbled into dust. Poor Jim took a chill after playing a fast game of tennis one day, and died almost without warning. I don't like even to think of it, I who had seen the two meet, and the summer of their love begin.

When Freda came to see us a year or so later, soon after her return from India, she was not the same Freda. Such wide, sorrowful eyes, in a face the soft roundness of which had given way to piteous hollows and angles. We young ones were not much with her. We used to go away out of her hearing with the little boy, and have rare games, for in spite of his black clothes he was as full of fun as a kitten. Freda used to sit with Aline in her little room, silent for the most part; but one day I was sitting in the window-seat reading, when Freda broke silence suddenly.

"I have been with you long enough, Aline. It is time for us to be going, Jacky and I. You have been good to keep us so long."

"Oh, my dear," said Aline, rather shocked; "where would you be welcome, if not in your own home? I suppose you cannot stay with us altogether, as we would all have wished? It is not likely you would be content?"

"Oh, no," said Freda, with a curious, unmirthful laugh, "it is not at all likely I should be content!"

Aline looked hurt a little, but I thought Freda could not mean to be so unkind as the words seemed. However, I said nothing; probably they had forgotten my presence. After a minute or two, Aline said:

"Of course, Sir John and Lady Hazeldine will want you to be with them—at least at first?"

"I'm not going to the Hazeldines'," Freda said, shortly.

"And what are your plans, then, dear?"

"Mrs. Vincent, who was so good to my Jim, is coming home from India. She wants me to live with her. Her husband is dead, and she is sadder even than I am, for she has no child."

"That will be a nice arrangement," said Aline; and I, who know all her ways, heard a ring of disappointment in her voice. I think she felt that Freda was going to make for herself a life in which we had no part.

"You will set up a sweet little house together, with a garden perhaps," she said after a minute or two, "and a couple of little maids, and perhaps a tiny carriage? You must take care of yourself, for you don't look strong, Freda."

"I shall be all right," said Freda, and again she laughed in that odd way. "Yes, I suppose Mrs. Vincent and I shall be very comfortable together."

"I thank God every day, Freda, that you and your little boy are well provided for. You will not always be unhappy, dear; you are too young. There is much to

make you glad yet in this world, though it has pleased God to take your dear husband. You will try and pluck up courage after you have left us, for your little boy's sake?"

Freda turned away her head and said nothing.

"I have wanted to speak to you, darling," said Aline, very gravely. "It is more than a year now since your great trouble, and it is time to begin to live again. I know that life can never be the same for you again, but, after all, Freda, to your faith and mine, is not death only a brief absence from each other for those who love truly? And though your absence from him is a time of sorrow and pain, his absence from you is the happiness of God. Can't you bear it, knowing all is well with him?"

Still Freda said not a word.

"Then his little child—the little one mustn't be robbed of the joy of life that is a child's inheritance. When you have gone back to London, darling, don't give yourself up to sadness. Make the sacrifice of your grief for the child's sake, and God will surely bless it. Don't stay at home and fret. Go into society, where many people will want you. Go about freely, and gather any brightness you can from life. Happily, you are not poor. Even I can see that it would be harder to escape from grief if one were very poor."

"Yes," said Freda, facing her for the first time, and with the oddest expression, "it would be harder if one were very poor."

She spoke with a kind of bitter amusement. Then Aline went over and kissed her.

"You won't think I am making little of your grief, you poor soul?"

"I could never be so unjust to you, Aline."

"There will be always Jim's mother to take care of you and love you, as well as your Mrs. Vincent. You and the child will be a good deal with Lady Hazeldine, I am sure?"

She spoke wistfully. I guessed that she was thinking Freda too young and too pretty to be launched in London society alone.

Freda's face became suddenly hard.

"I shall see very little of Lady Hazeldine, Aline. Perhaps I shall not need to say more when I tell you that she suggested to me that I should give up my boy to her."

Aline turned red and pale.

"Give up Jacky!" she said, incredulously.

"Yes, she had the insolence. But I will say no more. I did not mean to tell you, for she is Jim's mother; and now we will never talk about it again."

Aline looked at her doubtfully. She did not know whether to speak or not; but just then Jacky burst turbulently into the room, carrying a very large kite. He was crying out in his childish tongue, which no one but his mother seemed to thoroughly understand, that Uncle Hugh was going to "fy" it for him.

Freda caught him up suddenly to her breast, and held

him so a moment. A red spot came into each cheek, and I guessed what she was thinking of. At least that horrid Lady Hazeldine met her deserts when she dared to make such a proposal to Freda; that was a comforting thing to think upon.





CHAPTER VI.

“HOW OFT HAS THE BANSHEE CRIED?”

NOW, I have been going back a good long way, so that I might make it clearly understood what we Brandons have been doing, and, with a long family like ours, it takes time to pick up the threads of all the histories.

The years have passed quietly since then, and brought few changes except in our ages. We have never seen Freda since, though she writes long letters to Aline full of the old affection. She has never come to us, nor asked any of us to go to her, and we have almost given up thinking that she will ever accept Aline's tenderly-worded invitations, or that any of us will ever share the pleasures of her London life. Not that she writes very often from London. She seems to be usually at one country-house or another, and sometimes great names are mentioned in her letters, names of men we have heard of and would dearly like to see.

Her permanent address is Magnolia Cottage, Grove Avenue, Parson's Green, which, we think, sounds pretty and countrified. Aline always says that she is so pleased

that Mrs. Vincent and Freda had the good sense to settle in a country place rather than in Belgravia or Mayfair, or even Kensington, which she has heard are stuffy. Freda's home must be, she thinks, in some outlying village or other, though within reach of London. We imagine it a quiet place with a church and a little bit of common, and the houses of a few gentlefolk, standing round amid their hollies and laurels. It must be so good for Jacky, who does not seem to go with Freda to the country-houses, to live among rural surroundings rather than in the dust and smoke of the great city.

One event of the years has been Pierce's quarrel with Mr. Desmond, though they had seemed, from the letters Pierce wrote during their first years together, to be almost like father and son, or perhaps it would be better to say, like an elder and younger brother who dearly loved each other.

Pierce's letters in the old days were full of Mr. Desmond, for whom he seemed to have a kind of hero-worship. Then, without warning, we heard that they had quarrelled, and that Pierce had left Mr. Desmond and gone farther up country. We never heard what the quarrel was about. Pierce merely wrote to Aline that the thing was so; though behind the quiet of his letter there was evidently a cold anger against his former friend.

Then Mr. Desmond wrote to Aline—a letter that I, for one, liked, it was so gentle and deprecatory. He seemed to feel that Aline had trusted him with Pierce, and that

he had failed to keep his trust, but not through any fault of his own. He, too, gave no explanation of the quarrel, but only said something about young blood being hot, and his hope that presently the boy would cool down and recognize his real friends, and come back to him.

This letter Aline never answered. Of course she stood by Pierce, and thought Mr. Desmond must have been in the wrong. But though she carried it off so bravely, because her pride and love were up in arms, afterwards she fretted about Pierce. You see our boys have been such home-keeping boys that we are afraid, knowing that one is out in the wide world.

Pierce writes to Aline, of course, but tells her little about himself, and the letters come at longer intervals. There is never a word about the fortune he was to have made, and since those early years when he was with Mr. Desmond he sends home no money, though he must know how poor we are, and becoming poorer every year. I wonder how much longer we will be able to keep the wolf from the door, and Sir Rupert De Lacy out of Brandon.

Oh, by the way, I must mention that Sir Rupert has taken to sending us at intervals proposals for the purchase of the old place! In the beginning Aline used to open these, and then fling them indignantly into the fire; but with the more recent ones she has simply re-addressed them and sent them back unopened. I suppose the grim old wolf up there in Castle Angry just chuckles

when his epistles come back to him, knowing he can bide his time.

They say he drinks a great deal more than of old; but for the matter of that, no one can know, for he and Gaskin are the only two creatures inside Castle Angry. The place grows wickeder and grayer up there in its gash in the mountain, as legends and stories of its master's doings gather round it. I don't know if I said before that it is built after the manner of a fortified house, with a gateway under two turrets, and a moat drawn round about it. I have seen it from far off, and have thought its aspect had something sinister and frightful about it. The gates are locked and bolted, facing the bridge over the moat that has taken the place of what was once, no doubt, a drawbridge. The boys, who have ventured near, tell me that the moat is covered with green slime and full of unwholesome things, while the grassy space about is sodden, and overgrown with weird fungi of brilliant blue and scarlet. That is, no doubt, because of the exceeding damp of the place, for around and above it is bog, and the sun always seems to pass over that gash in Angry Mountain, as if there were something there which it hated.

The boys are very curious about what lies beyond the moat and the barred gate. I have implored them not to venture near again, for if Sir Rupert caught sight of them, or Gaskin, who is a worse man, either might loose the bloodhounds, and then say afterwards that it was none of their doing.

Poor boys! they are tall young striplings now; so handsome and distinguished for all their shabby clothes, made by Hugh Reilly, the tailor in Brandon village. It is hard that we could give them no proper education, and that they must be condemned indefinitely to do nothing except shoot rabbits on Brandon hill and fish in Brandon river. It is enough, as I say, to make good boys into worthless men.

Aline feels badly about it, I know. If there were but another buyer for Brandon—anyone except Sir Rupert—we would, I think, let it go, dear to us as it is. But it is not the place only, it is the poor people who depend on us, and who are miserably poor, if we are miserably poor. Sir Rupert would show them scant mercy, we know. He has cleared Angry long ago of the few poor creatures who clung to it, despite its unkindliness. The mountain sheep wander now where once there were hearth-fires.

“Let him keep Angry,” I say, “he shall not have Brandon.”

Curiously enough, I could bear better that he should have the house and Aline’s rose-garden, and the park and the river, and the old abbey even, than Brandon Mountain. Brandon and Angry are twin mountains; but there was a good fairy by the cradle of one, and a wicked fairy by the other. Blue, benign, smiling Brandon Mountain has watched over our race. Must he pass to the race of an enemy? Shall he, and the few little white cottages clustered about his feet, come under the blight that is upon Angry? No, a thousand times, no!

The boys are not so ignorant, however, as might be supposed. Mr. Benson, whether for love of Aline, or because, as he himself says, he would not have his classics rust, has been their unpaid tutor, and I am sure they are really far better educated than most boys of their age, even if their learning be a bit old-fashioned. Will they ever find their opportunities, I wonder? I remember when we used to hope that Mr. Desmond, having set Pierce's feet on a golden road, would perhaps help Hugh, who has never forgotten his childish admiration for the man. But all that has come to nothing. Pierce was the raven we sent out of our ark in search of good tidings; but he came not back.

Aline has grown older almost by years in the months that have elapsed since Pierce and Mr. Desmond parted. I have seen her come down in the morning worn and haggard, and have guessed that she has either spent a great part of the night in prayer for her beloved, or else she has slept ill, and been troubled in her dreams about him.

I think she fears that things are not well with him, and I know that she has implored him in vain to come home. His letters bring her at once joy and disappointment. In every one, I think, she hopes that he will say he is coming back. She herself, with her own hands, still keeps his room swept and garnished, and the bed-clothes ever ready aired, as though at any hour of the day or night a wanderer might return.

Aline's little turret faces the great avenue of Brandon.

Lately, I have noticed that at any hour of the night I might waken, her light was burning; but only yesterday Oona told me that a lamp burns all night in the uncurtained window. I am sure that Aline's heart watches awake for Pierce, even when her body is sleeping. But lest he should come suddenly in the dark hours, she sets the light there like a star to draw him home. Who knows through what mirk and what distance it may find him at last?

"Oh, Oona, dear," I cried to our old nurse when she had told me of the light, "I wish he would come back! It troubles me to see the hope and the disappointment that are always following each other in Aline's face. It is wearing her out."

"Now, look here, Miss Hilda dear," the old woman said, putting a comfortable arm about me, "'tis my opinion that Master Pierce 'll never come home unless he brings the riches, my dear. He knows what was expected of him, and he's proud, terrible proud, as becomes a Brandon. No, he'll never come, except with the gold in his hand, or the death in his face; and if he knew he was to be taken, I don't think he could stay away from the sister that's been mother and sweetheart both to him."

"Oona, Oona," cried I, "you're talking horribly! What has death to do with Pierce, who was always so strong and well? I wouldn't have you say such a thing to Aline for worlds."

"No, nor I wouldn't, my pretty; only to you that has

the wise head and the still tongue. But I see the trouble coming, and if I don't halve it, my old heart will break."

She looked at me curiously, still keeping me pressed closely to her, and her face had grown indeed full of trouble.

"Do ye sleep very sound o' nights, love?" she asked presently.

"Pretty well, Oona, unless when the wind crying in the corridors keeps me awake."

"There's more cries there nor the wind."

"Oh, Oona, what do you mean? What superstition have you got into your head now?"

"No superstition at all, then," said Oona, a little offended; "and perhaps I'd better have kept my tongue to myself."

"Perhaps you had, Oona; but since you didn't, you may as well go on. I suppose you think you've heard the banshee?"

The old woman nodded her head solemnly.

"There was no thinking about it, dearie. She's cried the last three nights, and grateful I am that Miss Aline slept sound and didn't hear her."

"If Miss Aline heard any crying, she would know it was the wind. Her trust is all in God, and she knows that He keeps the things of life and death in His own hands, and that His love is all about her. She would tell you there was no such thing as the banshee."

"She would not, Miss Hilda, and I wonder at you to say the like. No Brandon should say it. 'Tis just be-

cause ye are Brandons, the finest, purest, ould blood alive, that she cries for ye."

Oona went off visibly indignant, and left me vaguely troubled. Though I had spoken so boldly, I fear it is not in Brandon blood quite to disbelieve in the banshee. And would it not be to deprive our ancient race of one of the proudest of its appanages? We have lost so much that we may well keep this shadowy retainer of ours.

After all, I am not surprised at Oona. It is all very well in the broad daylight to deny the banshee, but it is different at night when the lights are out, and one is alone, and starts from one's pillow to hear the wind, or something, crying through the old half-ruined house.

This morning put it out of my mind. For the boys had been wild-duck shooting before it was daybreak, and had heard a bit of news from their crony, Jim Hagarty, with which to regale the breakfast-table. News is scarce with us, I needn't say; and, like all country people, we dearly love to hear of our neighbours.

"Jim says Sir Rupert's grandson has come to visit him. He arrived on Saturday, and there was no one to meet him at the station, and he had to have out O'Haire's fly to carry his portmanteau and things over to Angry."

"And the next day a groom arrived with a fine horse, and asked his way to Castle Angry. But Jim says he went away by the train the same evening. I suppose there was no place for him at Angry," adds Donald, taking up the tale.

Aline's kind face took on a look of concern.

"I hope it is not true," she said. "Castle Angry is no place for a boy."

"Oh, it is true enough!" the boys cried together, "for Tom O'Haire read the name on the luggage, and it was 'Harry De Lacy'. And he says that Gaskin came out and took in the things, and wouldn't let Tom drive inside the courtyard, but Tom heard the dogs howling and yelping, and someone shouting at them, whom he took to be Sir Rupert. So he says that he wasn't sorry to drive away like mad as soon as he'd set down his passenger, fearing they'd take it into their heads to loose the dogs."

"Poor boy!" says Aline regretfully. "He cannot be more than twenty-one. Why has he come to such a place?"

"Possibly Sir Rupert has made him," I suggested. "It would be like one of his grim jokes to introduce the heir to his property. He is the heir, isn't he?"

"Yes, Angry is entailed right enough."

"Probably Sir Rupert's grandson will be able to hold his own even with Sir Rupert," I said; but Aline shook her head.

"His father never could hold his own, and Oona will tell you that his mother was fair and gentle and delicate. It is cruel of Sir Rupert to bring him here, having left him all his years with his English grandfather."

"Is he so different?" asked Esther, who had been listening with interest.

"I have heard that he is a gentle old man, very learned

and very pious. His rectory is in Warwickshire, in beautiful English pastoral country. This boy must have had a tenderly-nurtured youth."

"By Jove!" muttered Hugh, "and think of the poor beggar coming to Angry!"

"He can't have been prepared either," said Donald, "or he'd never have brought all those traps with him—gun-cases and fishing-tackle and tennis-rackets and no end of things. By Jove, much use he'll find for them at Angry!"

"We must only hope that his visit will be a short one," said Aline, with one of her gentle sighs.

I am sure this strange boy interests her because she sees in every boy something of Pierce, something, too, of Hugh and Donald. Ah! well, we Brandons, despite short commons and no money, have had as happy a childhood as children ever had. I know Mother left us to Aline, and well has Aline kept trust with her. She will not need to look away when they meet one day in heaven.



CHAPTER VII.

A TRUE WORD SPOKEN IN JEST.

TO-DAY Esther and I were sitting with Aline in her room. It was bitterly cold, though fine and sunny. I should have liked to be out with the twins, whom I could see in the garden below tramping up and down steadily, hand in hand. They are growing up as wild and shy as a little pair of rabbits, and they are quite safe to keep to the gardens once Aline has told them there was a fear of their meeting the hunt if they went out to the park or the woods. They fear nothing except the eyes of strangers. It makes us laugh to know that they who would face Lord Aranmore's tallest stag, or the little wild, horned, mountain cattle, will turn round and run, still hand in hand, if they should happen to see a well-dressed stranger approaching them.

I had promised to help Aline with some baby-clothes she was making for poor Mary Kennedy, whose husband was killed by a falling tree in the summer, and whose first baby was born the other day, else I too should have been out-of-doors, though I am not brisk in getting about; and Esther, who takes care that I am never left behind,

nor made to feel a drag on the pleasure of the others, would have been with me.

The things we are sewing at are made out of clothes we ourselves had when we were little. They are fine, dainty little garments, and smell sweetly of lavender. It almost breaks Oona's heart that Aline will use them for the children of the poor. She says that coarse stuffs would be far better, and perhaps she is right, but we have no money to purchase the coarse stuffs if we would. Oona never argues with Aline about it, but gives up the keys of the drawers that contain the treasures, without words indeed, but with sighs as from a breaking heart. Aline, for all her gentleness, makes even Oona feel that she is mistress.

Aline has a curious love and tenderness for little babies, and she would not feel the finest stuffs in the world too good for their little tender bodies. I have seen her nursing them with an expression half-divine. I am not sure that she does not see in every one of them the little Baby of Bethlehem, and that they are not the more precious for being born, like Him, in poverty. Then she is veriest woman. I cannot bear to think of Aline growing old unmarried. But that is one of the secret thoughts I keep to myself.

Suddenly my eyes, that had been straying from my seam, caught sight of a gleam of scarlet in the distant coppice. Another and another, and then I jumped to my feet and limped to the window. There were the hounds stretching in a long line away to Larry's Spinney, and

hard on their heels went half a dozen scarlet coats, shadowed with here and there a blue habit. I cried out, "The hunt, the hunt, Esther! Oh, come and see!"

Aline looked with benign amusement at our excitement.

"Run out, children," she said; "you will see better from the summer-house in the rose-garden. Don't let the twins tumble out of the window, and go easily, Hilda dear; there will be plenty of time, for the river will turn them."

We went out rejoicing. The summer-house is in two stories, a wooden structure with seats, and little windows of coloured glass, opening inwards, that may be shut against the weather. We found the twins already in possession of the upper window, but, taking the privileges of elder sisters, we packed them below, where they went rather grumblingly.

Yes, the hunt had turned, and was coming back our way. It would pass quite close to us, and no one would notice us, for their excitement would be too absorbing.

"Why, there are the boys," I cried, "over yonder on the branch of the chestnut! Poor boys, how they must want to follow!"

Even the boys did not see us. As soon as the hunt passed they would go pounding away across country to get another glimpse. Ah! there was Jack Tobin the huntsman, and Graves the whipper-in, and, well in front, Lord Clandeboye the master, and his pretty daughter, and following came a rout of scarlet and black.

"Esther," whispered I, "supposing that as they went by one should look up and fall in love with you, and that he should prove to be Prince Charming."

"Why not with you, Hilda?" she said, with one of her rich blushes.

"What have I to do with love or lovers?" I asked; and it was indeed true that since my accident I had considered that my life was outside the romances of other girls.

The ground slopes under the thick yew hedge of the rose-garden, so that, as the riders came pounding along at the foot of the hill, we had them well in view. One was riding a beautiful bay horse, which attracted my attention before my eyes went to the rider's face. When I looked at him I gave Esther's arm a pinch.

"There goes your knight, Esther," I cried. "Now, if only he would have an accident, and we could take him in and nurse him, it would be like one of your story-books. Let us will him to fall down—shall we?"

But Esther seemed not to have heard me. She had drawn back suddenly into the shadow of the room. The young rider had caught sight of us, and was looking up. For the moment he was evidently not thinking of the hunt, for his sideways gaze was a long, direct one. Then I saw that Esther was blushing hotly all over her dark face, and her eyes had sunk under her long soft lashes.

"I am afraid he heard your voice, Hilda dear," she murmured; and then her eyes flashed out again with sudden horror and fear.

Startled, I looked in the direction of her glance. There, where the young rider had been flashing along in the run downhill, lay the horse kicking and struggling, and a space in front of him the huddled-up figure of his master.

Some of the other hunters were off their horses, and running and shouting, but nearest of all were our two brothers, who in a second of time had reached the prostrate man. Then a group of men hid all from our sight; but in a second or two we saw that they had lifted the young man, and had laid him on a space of sward.

I looked round at Esther. Her eyes were wide open, and she was deadly pale.

"You're not going to faint?" I said.

"No," she answered, and the colour came back to her cheeks and lips. "You don't think he's dead, Hilda?"

"I hope not. Dr. Rivers is there, fortunately. Come and we will see what has happened. Someone will tell us."

"Yes," said Esther. "Come and see. Of course he must be taken to Brandon."

"Unless he is near his own home," I suggested.

Esther looked at me almost angrily.

"He must be taken to Brandon," she said again.

She went out with an air that might have been Aline's own. No one would have thought that she was the younger sister, as I humbly followed her. She went up to the little group that stood about the fallen man, and though everyone turned to look at her, she did not seem to notice them.

"I hope he is not very much hurt, Dr. Rivers," she said. "Of course you will carry him into the house at once."

The doctor lifted his hat.

"I'm afraid there's a concussion of the brain—he was flung on his head—but I can't examine him properly here. Thank you, Miss Brandon. Of course the best thing would be to get him indoors at once. Your brother has kindly offered the poor fellow the hospitality of your house."

Esther turned to Hugh, who was standing by. "Run in quickly," she said, "and tell Aline we are coming."

Presently, as they were making up a rough litter on which to carry him, Donald came to my side and whispered that the young man was a stranger in these parts, and that no one seemed to know where he had dropped from. Also that the horse, which they had thought must be badly injured, had done nothing worse than lame himself. He had stepped in a rabbit-hole, and so caused the accident."

"They had better bring in the poor beast too," he added. "There are no lack of empty stalls, and I daresay we can find him a bit of bedding."

In a few minutes they were carrying the young fellow towards the house, the horse following with a hanging head, as if he were conscious that his master was hurt, and felt himself in some degree to blame. He was a beautiful beast, and I was so glad he was not hurt, for all dumb animals are very near my heart, that I felt irrationally hopeful about his master's case also.

However, Dr. Rivers seemed to think the business very serious. There was concussion, he found, and he feared internal injuries as well, so that the young man might lie unconscious and on our hands for some time.

"It is too bad, Miss Brandon," he said to Aline, "that you should have all this trouble thrust upon you. He ought really to have a nurse."

He hesitated and looked at her. Aline smiled faintly.

"Oona, our old nurse, has considerable experience in sick nursing," she said, "and, as you see, she will have several lieutenants."

The doctor nodded approvingly.

"I should not dare to order his removal, even if we knew that he had friends in the neighbourhood."

"Pray do not think of such a thing," said Aline hastily. "The fact that he met with his accident near our doors is his claim upon us. Heaven forbid that we should grudge him anything we can do!"

I saw Dr. Rivers, who is a bachelor, look at her with a very distinct glance of admiration.

"It is curious that no one seems to know him," he said, looking down at the unconscious face of his patient. "Of course, he may have ridden some distance to the meet, yet his horse seemed fresh, and was well in front all the time."

"He must be the stranger within the gates till he can speak for himself," Aline replied. "Only, I pray that no one may be in tortures of suspense about his absence."

Dr. Rivers had already turned out the young fellow's

pockets, in a vain search for a clue to his identity. A silver cigar-case with an intricate monogram, a handkerchief with the same lettering, a match-box, a pair of gloves; these told us nothing. We must wait for time to clear up the mystery.

After Dr. Rivers had gone, and Oona was installed in the sick-room, I crept in softly to where she sat beside the fire, sewing and crooning to herself, just as I remember her when I was three years old.

I came in on tiptoe, but Oona smiled at me reassuringly.

"You needn't be afraid, Miss Hilda, child. He's nearly as sound off as if he were dead. It would take nearly as much to waken him."

I looked at the face in the shadow of the chintz curtains. It was a fair, boyish face, with something very sweet and captivating about it, even through its rigid pallor. A small golden moustache hid the quiet mouth, and the hair was golden. The lids were only half-closed over the eyes, so that I was startled a minute.

"He looks as if he were dead, Oona," I cried, starting back.

"He's not dead, Miss Hilda, don't you be afraid of that; and what's more, he's not going to die."

"He is very handsome," I said, venturing on another glance.

"He is,—a downright pretty young gentleman," said Oona; and the phrase seemed the right one. His was an almost feminine charm and sweetness.

Ever since the accident I had been troubled by the

foolish thing I had been saying to Esther just at the moment it happened. Of course it was only a jest, and could have had no possible effect; a silly joke couldn't have made the bay put its foot in a rabbit-hole. Still, I felt horribly disquieted about it, and only hoped that Esther had not heard me, as she certainly had not seemed to.

"It would be horrible, Oona," said I, "if your banshee had been crying for him."

Oona looked at me almost with contempt.

"'Tis English he is, by the cut of him," she said. "I never heard tell of an English family that *she* followed."

Oona shook her head and sighed, and I knew that she was thinking the mysterious warning betokened death for one of us. It made me feel rather creepy, so I went out, closing the door, and in search of Esther.

I found her lying down. She had a headache, she said, and she looked flushed and ill at ease.

"Dear old Essie," I said as I patted her pillows, "the shock of seeing the accident has upset you. You must try and sleep, and then you will be better."

I felt a little lost for want of Esther's company, as I stole down to Aline's room. Finding it empty, I crept into a corner by the fire and lost my sense of loneliness in a novel. But only for a time, for it wasn't a very convincing novel, and the thing which had happened to us only this morning was much more interesting.

Presently my novel slipped from my knee, and I sat with my chin propped in my hands, looking into the heart

of the cosy driftwood fire. All of a sudden an illumination came to me. Why, the boy upstairs was, must be, Sir Rupert's grandson. How amazing that nobody should have thought of it but me!

"This makes a horribly awkward complication," I thought, having made up my mind on the first matter. "If Aline recognizes the probability of my guess, she will think it her duty to send word to Sir Rupert. I feel quite sure that Sir Rupert is wicked and determined enough to remove the young fellow at the risk of his life. He wouldn't be beholden to a Brandon for anything. Then, if the removal didn't kill him, the tender mercies of Castle Angry would be sure to do it."

I shuddered to think of the poor young fellow lying ill at Castle Angry. Why, Sir Rupert or James Gaskin might kill him in one of their orgies. There was something helpless and appealing in my memory of the quiet young face that went to my heart.

"I shall keep my counsel," I said aloud, as I have a habit of doing. "I may be right or wrong, but it seems to me that no harm can lie in silence."

So not even to Esther did I whisper my suspicions; but I was surprised at the density of everybody except myself. Even the boys, who told us first that Sir Rupert's grandson had come home, exhausted their conjectures about the stranger's identity, and never once stumbled near the truth.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGER WITHIN THE GATE.

THE young man had been many days under our roof, and we knew no more of him than at the first; yet the mystery but deepened our interest in him. A handsome, fashionably dressed young man, and a fine bay horse, do not disappear out of the world every day with not a soul apparently to seek after them, or inquire of their fate. We discussed the matter at every meal. We were so much interested, indeed, that we kept more to the house than of old; and the boys had pleasure and exercise enough in cantering the stranger's horse up and down the long avenue; for the fine spirited brute soon grew hot-blooded in the stable, and he would have kicked the crazy stalls to pieces if his spirits had not had some vent.

One or other of us was always stealing in on tiptoe to the high, light room, where Oona sat sewing, her face looking very important in the shadow of her huge frilled cap.

"How is he now, Oona?" we would ask, and Oona would answer, "No better and no worse"; and then, with

a glance at the rigid young face on the pillows, we would steal out again.

But the third day I found Esther sitting, in a familiar attitude of hers, on the rug at Oona's feet, with an open book on her knee, and her eyes gazing into the heart of the fire. Esther had been very silent while we gabbled about the young stranger's identity; she was never one to talk much. Yet I could see that she listened eagerly for the doctor's verdict every morning when he would come tramping down to Aline's room after visiting his patient. She did not seem quite the old Esther in those days. She had an absent manner, which no one seemed to notice but myself, and she looked a little pale, and had dark rings about her eyes, as if she did not sleep well at night.

On the sixth day the young man began to come back to life again. So Esther told us when she came gliding into her place at the breakfast-table. She had spoken to Oona outside the door, and Oona had told her. She looked glad and excited, and I felt that pity for the young stranger had been troubling her of late more than the rest of us.

Still, even when the young man was conscious, Dr. Rivers enjoined absolute quiet. We were not to trouble yet about people who might be sorrowing for his absence. As he got better he would remember of himself, and let us know.

Aline was now the only visitor to the sick-room. The sick man seemed to have got as used to her face and

Oona's as if he had always known them. Aline told us that he showed pleasure in her visits, and I think that, half unknown to herself, in those days she began to lay the foundation of a warm affection for the boy, in whose case Pierce might have been.

At last he was well enough to ask her to write a letter for him. It was to his grandfather, an English clergyman, and told him in the briefest possible way, for he was not equal to much thought, about his fall, and that he was steadily recovering, so that there was no cause for anxiety.

Aline came downstairs with the letter in her hand, and when I came in from the stables, where I had been giving the bay an apple, I found her standing by the hall-table, gazing at the envelope with a puzzled line between her eyes.

"Come here, Hilda," she said, "and tell me if you have any associations with this name."

I took the letter from her hand. It was addressed to the Rev. Henry Vane, Wrixmundham Rectory, Warwickshire.

"No; I'm sure I haven't," I replied. "Never heard of a Vane before in my life, except Cromwell's Sir Harry. Perhaps you are thinking of him."

"No; I don't think so," said Aline, putting the letter into the tattered basket which served us for post-bag. "I suppose I must have only fancied it, but I certainly did seem to have heard the name before."

I often looked towards Angry in those days, and

thought how hard-hearted Sir Rupert must be never to have concerned himself about his grandson's fate. It was probably true that, as people said, he hated the boy, as he had hated his mother and his father, though the latter was his own flesh and blood. Well, I was glad that in his weakness and need the poor boy was in Oona's motherly hands, rather than at the mercy of that pair of old wretches over yonder. I had him on my conscience somehow since I had made that foolish speech, which had hardly left my mouth before the accident occurred.

The rest of the household seemed to think that the mystery was solved. Our visitor was an Englishman, come over for the hunting probably, as many did every year, and whose headquarters were at some inn or other, and that was all.

Meanwhile he progressed slowly, but quite to Dr. Rivers' satisfaction. Presently he was able to come downstairs for longer and longer intervals. At first he leant on the boys as he made the journey, but after a time he was able to manage with my stick and the help of the banisters. I don't think any of us ever asked ourselves when he would be well enough to go, though he must be a strain on our resources. He looked so gentle and so young, and his manner was so grateful, that we all grew quite fond of him. And yet we had never heard his name. The omission did not seem to strike him, and it did not occur to any of us to ask him.

One day Esther suggested shyly to Aline that we should read to our guest and play to him, to relieve the tedium

of his invalidism. Aline assented heartily, and made the suggestion to him when he was established on the sofa for the afternoon.

"We have no newspapers," she said, laughing, "except the *Lissycasey Leader*, and our magazines are thirty years old, but there are some novels and poetry. Or if you do not care for reading, Esther will play to you, but the piano has not been tuned for years."

He lifted up his eyes, which had begun to smile again, though they were hollow.

"I should like the poetry if Miss Hilda or Miss Esther will be so good as to read to me."

I brought down my old Tennyson and selected *Maud*, which I love best of all the poems. I read on in a silence only broken by the crackling of the logs in the grate. Aline had left us, and Esther had gone over to the fire, and was sitting on the old sheep-skin rug, with her arms leaning on a chair, propping her cheek. Outside there were blue skies and keen frost, and the room with its painted wreaths on the wall, and the faded old brocade of curtains and chair-covers, looked warm and pleasant.

"I have led her home, my love, my only friend;
There is none like her, none.
And never yet so warmly ran my blood,
And sweetly, on and on,
Calming itself to the long-wished-for end,
Full to the banks, close on the promised good.

"None like her, none.
Just now the dry-tongued laurels' pattering talk
Seemed her light foot along the garden walk,

And shook my heart to think she comes once more;
But even then I heard her close the door;
The gates of Heaven are closed and she is gone.

“There is none like her, none,
Nor will be when our summers have deceased.
O, art thou sighing for Lebanon;
In the long breeze that streams to thy delicious East,
Sighing for Lebanon.
Dark cedar, though thy limbs have here increased
Upon a pastoral slope as fair,
And looking to the South, and fed
With honeyed rain and delicate air,
And haunted by the starry head
Of her whose gentle will has changed my fate,
And made my life a perfumed altar-flame.”

When I had read so far, a sense of something electrical in the room made me look up suddenly from the page. The invalid had lifted himself a little on his elbow, and was gazing at my sister's lovely unconscious face, with such a curious intentness and yearning that I felt a shock of surprise and consternation. As my voice ceased he fell back on his pillow, and at the same moment Esther turned slowly like one waking.

“Oh, do go on, Hilda,” she said; “it is lovely!”

I read on, but no more forgot myself in the poem. My thoughts were perturbed. Was it possible that my foolish speech the other day could come true? Was there really such a thing as love at first sight? And if the young fellow was in love with Esther, and if she should respond to him, how would things be? The hereditary enemy—why, it would be *Romeo and Juliet* over again.

The romance of it fluttered my pulses a little, but I have a certain measure of plain common-sense, which Esther has not, where it is a question of romance. I didn't see how such a love affair could end happily, for Sir Rupert would move heaven and earth to keep his grandson from marrying a Brandon, and no doubt the young fellow was dependent on him till his death.

These thoughts came between me and the page. I knew I was reading badly, for the invalid sighed once or twice uneasily, and even Esther turned and looked at me in wonder. At last I went over and put the book into her lap.

"Go on, Essie," said I, "I am tired."

I wanted to go and tell Aline who I guessed the stranger to be, as I ought to have done at first when I suspected it.

"Do you know, Aline," I cried, bursting in on her where she was sitting with a huge pile of mending beside her, "I believe I've guessed who our visitor is."

"Indeed, Hilda! And who is he?"

"Why, Sir Rupert's grandson."

Aline dropped her piece of mending, and stared at me aghast.

"Why should you think so, Hilda? He hasn't told you?"

"I've been putting two and two together, and I think we are a parcel of dunderheads not to have thought of it before. Don't you remember that the boys told us, a couple of days before the accident, that Sir Rupert's

grandson had come home, and about the horse following? Then who in the world would be so unnatural as to make no inquiries after the boy except that same horrid old Sir Rupert?"

"You are probably right, Hilda. I wonder we didn't think of it. And that, of course, was why I thought I recognized his grandfather's name. Of course his mother's name was Mary Vane. I remember now to have heard it from our own dear mother."

"It is plain enough to me," I said. "I only wonder we didn't think of it all along."

"Ah, you see you are the wise Hilda! But it wouldn't have made any difference. We couldn't have let him die outside our walls if he were twenty times our hereditary enemy."

"Which he hardly is."

"No, poor boy," said Aline, a little sorrowfully, I thought. "He surely is not. Clearly, he knows nothing about the feud or he would have recognized our name as soon as he heard it."

"If he knew, I don't suppose it would make any difference," said I; "those musty old hatreds can't go on for ever."

"I don't believe any ever existed, except in Sir Rupert's heart. I know our grandfather, whom he had wronged deeply, forgave him fully, and, when he spoke of him in his latter days, wept, I have heard, because at one time he had thought of him like a brother, and, being the good man he was, the old affection had come back."

"You will ask him, I suppose, if we are not right?"

"Oh yes, I shall ask him! but it can make no difference at present. Here he must stay till he is fit to go, and I shall make that plain to him."

"But afterwards?"

"Afterwards?" said Aline, looking sad. "I fear we shall see no more of him. By the way, I left you reading to him."

"Yes, I handed over the reading to Esther when I felt I had to come and tell you."

"Better go back now, dear Hilda," she said gently. "Of course it must make no difference in our treatment of him while he stays, but we must remember that when he goes, he goes finally."

From this I guessed that she, too, had a vague uneasiness about Esther.

When I opened the door of the room and went in, I saw that the reading had evidently been over for some time. Tennyson lay on the floor unheeded, and the two were talking like old friends. The boy looked flushed and happy and a little shy. Esther, more unconscious, was listening to his talk at her ease, but evidently much interested.

"We have been talking, Miss Hilda," said the boy. "Your sister disclaimed any idea of reading poetry after you, so we talked instead; at least I talked, all about myself, and your sister listened."

"Essie is always a good listener," said I absently.

Presently Aline came in to pay the invalid her usual

afternoon visit. I was relieved when, a minute or two afterwards, Esther went out. Somehow I wanted to tell her first, not to have it sprung on her suddenly, that the young stranger was one we must not permit ourselves to like.

After a few commonplace phrases had been spoken, Aline said:

"By the way, it is a little odd that we don't yet know your name. It hasn't struck you that we have no name to call you by?"

The young fellow blushed and laughed.

"By Jove, how stupid of me! It never struck me that all your goodness was shown to a man whose name actually you were in ignorance of. I am Harry De Lacy."

"Sir Rupert De Lacy's grandson?"

"Yes. Do you know him? But I don't suppose you do. He is like an ogre shut up in his castle; but you will know of him by repute. He was rather a shock to me, Miss Brandon, for my dear old grandfather in Warwickshire had not at all prepared me for him. He is rather odd, you know."

"Perhaps your English grandfather did not know," said Aline with her face averted.

"Perhaps not. I know they haven't met for years. I always understood that they weren't very good friends, but my English grandfather is not one to rub it in. He probably thought that Time would have changed Sir Rupert."

"Else he would hardly have let you come."

"There was no question of letting. He would have thought it my duty. Beyond that, I think he could scarcely bear me to leave him. But still he could have had no idea of the difference," said the lad impulsively.

"The difference?"

"Between what I had been used to and what I was coming to. He is a saint if ever there was one. I have been brought up there from babyhood, in an atmosphere of peace and love for God and man. Within these four walls I have never heard a rough word. We lived not in luxury, indeed, for so much is given to the poor, but in refinement, and among books and pictures, and all beautiful things. And then to come to Castle Angry—"

He broke off abruptly.

"Miss Brandon, I am talking freely to you, but do you think my grandfather—Sir Rupert, I mean—is mad?"

Aline did not answer at once. Knowing, as we do, Sir Rupert's wickedness, she found it difficult to speak of him to his heir, who apparently knew nothing. At last she answered, looking down:

"Perhaps he is. Only God knows."

"I found the place so filthy," he went on excitedly; "why, a decent kennel would be sweeter and cleaner. The floors are rotting, the plaster falling from the walls and ceiling; everything is going to pieces with damp and neglect. It is horrible, horrible!"

"Poor boy!" said Aline, turning her large limpid eyes upon him; "poor boy!"

The tears suddenly started into his eyes. He was still weak, of course, from his illness, and was likely to be for a long time.

"It isn't the ruin and dirt and discomfort—it is—other things. I believe my poor grandfather is mad, and that fellow Gaskin, his bailiff,—if ever I saw scoundrelism in a human being it is in that fellow. I flogged him soundly the first day I was at Castle Angry. I found him savagely ill-treating one of those wretched dogs, which he had taken care to tie up securely first."

"Oh!" said Aline in a low voice, which, I am afraid, trembled with pleasure. "And what did your grandfather say when he heard?"

"He came out in the middle of it, and roared with laughter. Gaskin was cutting capers to make anyone laugh if the thing hadn't been so sickening. He's a coward too. He slunk off as gray as lead when I let him go. It made me feel that to flog such a creature was degradation."

"Oh no," cried Aline, "surely not! It was right to make him feel something of the pain he had inflicted. Still, you must be careful of the man. I am sure he would make a dangerous enemy. But perhaps you will not go back to Castle Angry when you leave us. You will return to Warwickshire?"

A cloud came over his face.

"I think not; my place is here. My grandfather is very old, Miss Brandon, older than anyone would think. His age will find him out suddenly, as age does with

people who have defied it beyond the natural time. He will want me then, even if he does not want me now. Think of him, old and alone, with Gaskin, in that isolated house! No, I shall stay."

"You will be right," said Aline slowly. "But it is a heavy burden for young shoulders. May God protect the right!"

He looked at her gratefully. Then, with a sudden impulse he took up a fold of her skirt and kissed it, and Aline put her hand on his head as if she were blessing him. They seemed to have forgotten me, so I just came out of my corner and extended a hand to him, which he took and pressed warmly.

That night when I was going to bed Aline called me into her room.

"Do you know, Hilda," she said, "I never thought of telling him, after all, that he was the hereditary enemy."

"No more you didn't," said I cheerfully.

Aline looked at me, and then smiled broadly.

"You didn't conduct the interview on those grounds at all," said I; but all the same I felt that there might be a serious side to the matter.



CHAPTER IX.

AN IMPOSSIBLE FRIENDSHIP.

EARLIER in the evening I had taken the opportunity of being alone with Esther to tell her of our discovery. She heard me quietly, though her eyes looked startled.

"But it ought to make no difference, Hilda," she said, when I had finished. "It is not his fault that he is Sir Rupert's grandson."

"No, indeed," I assented, "and I am sure no one would ever suppose it. Still, Aline seems to think that we ought not to let him get into our lives, so to speak, since it will probably be impossible to keep him there."

"To get into our lives!" Esther repeated slowly; "but he only came such a little while ago! One does not make a stranger part of one's life quite so soon."

I thought it might have been said as much to reassure herself as me; but then, again, she might have spoken quite in good faith.

"No," I answered her, "only we have so few friends that it is hard to feel we must be on our guard against a new one."

For a day or two we all tried hard to obey Aline's injunctions, and, without being inhospitable in any way, to leave Mr. De Lacy to his own devices more than we had been doing. This was comparatively easy, as he was getting stronger daily, and could read for himself by this time.

But we had reckoned without our guest.

The second or third time that Aline came to his sofa with her inquiries, into which she had infused a little shadow of formality,—for she rather repented her emotion that first day,—he put a detaining hand on her arm when she would have turned away.

"Miss Brandon," he cried entreatingly, "why are you leaving me out in the cold? Why? I was so happy before, and I have had nothing for two whole days but cold politeness. What have I done?"

"Nothing," said Aline. "We want you to be happy while you are here, but—"

"But what?"

"We are near neighbours, Mr. De Lacy, and your grandfather would tell you that friendship between the De Lacys and the Brandons is impossible. We shall have to be strangers when you leave us, for I don't think we shall ever be enemies."

"But why is friendship impossible between us? What barrier is there? I acknowledge none, whatever my grandfather may say."

He spoke peremptorily, and Aline sighed.

"It is a long story, but I have time to tell it to you

this afternoon. Let me sit down, however," she said, for he still clutched her sleeve.

He let her go with an apology, and Aline, drawing over one of the chairs that were embroidered by dead-and-gone Brandons, told him the story, only suppressing any accusation of foul play against Sir Rupert. The men who had been friends had become rivals and enemies. Sir Rupert had acquired part of Brandon, and had become wealthy by means of it, while Brandon had gone steadily to the dogs. She left out all the darker shades in the story; but, despite her kindly caution, her listener filled them in for himself. As she went on, he blushed and grew pale alternately.

When she had finished there was silence for a few minutes. Then young De Lacy said passionately:

"I see you have good reason to hate me and mine."

"To hate you! Oh, no! How could we hate you who are quite innocent? And then one does not usually hate—"

She paused, and he took up the sentence:

"Those one has done good to. But that is Christian forgiveness, Miss Brandon, and I ask for more than that. Listen; whatever fraud, whatever foul play my grandfather used against yours, I abhor a thousand times more than you do. I want none of his ill-gotten wealth. He can do with it what he will. If it were mine I should only strive by hook or by crook to restore it to its rightful owners. Because he has done such things, am I to be cut off from gratitude, from affection, from

lasting friendship to those who have nursed and sheltered me? I am not. When I leave these doors you may shut them against me if you will, but you cannot forbid my waiting and watching till they shall open again."

He spoke with a boyish impetuosity that swept Aline off her feet.

"My dear boy," she said, "why, I only wish that we might be friends. Don't you see that it is because we mustn't be friends that I try to keep our liking and intimacy from taking too strong a hold upon us."

"You are not likely to like me too much," he said bitterly. "The kin of the lamb do not love overmuch the wolf that devoured it."

"We could like you very well," said Aline simply, "but we must not."

He turned away his head disconsolately.

"I will take myself off as soon as I can, Miss Brandon," he said with a coldness which did not serve to hide his pain. "I dare say Dr. Rivers will let me go to-morrow. I have been a trouble to you too long."

All Aline's tender sympathies swung round to him sharply.

"Oh, no!" she said; "you will stay till the doctor thinks you are quite able to go, and that will not be to-morrow, or for many to-morrows."

"I shall go," he said obstinately, "unless you can treat me as you did up to the day before yesterday. Don't you see that I can't accept your goodness and endure your coldness. I should go, if it meant my death."

"There, there," said Aline soothingly. "I shall not be cold to you, and you must stay till you are quite well able to go. I don't suppose Castle Angry would be quite the best place for an invalid."

She said it with a deprecating smile.

"No," he answered seriously, "I don't think at all that I should get well there. But when I leave here it must be for Castle Angry all the same."

So it came that our precautions were set at nought. Aline had told the younger ones who our visitor was, but it had not seemed to impress them very much. We had no hereditary hatred in our veins; and the boys, who listened with delight to his spirited accounts of big football and cricket matches, of the life of a public school, and such things, pronounced him no end of a jolly good fellow, quite irrespective of the fact of his being a De Lacy. The little girls, too, usually so shy and strange, had made friends with him, and played interminable games of dominoes and chess beside his sofa, evening after evening.

As he grew stronger and was able to stay up later, his sofa grew to be, in a way, the centre of things in the big drawing-room. We could not very well be at one end and he at the other, and of course we all converged towards the fire, near which his sofa was drawn. There was no doubt at all that he had very attractive ways, gentle, well-bred, and gracious; and we all grew to like him very much indeed.

But there were no more of these readings of poetry.

I took care of that. I noticed, too, that Esther seemed now to be the one he had least to say to, which pleased me well. After all, that look I had caught that day I read *Maud* might have meant nothing, or only the strong admiration which Esther must awaken in the breast of anyone with a feeling for beauty. Daily she grew more beautiful. She seemed to glow in the shadowy corners which she always selected for herself, like a deep damask rose half-hidden in leaves. I seemed never to have understood my sister's beauty before.

At last Dr. Rivers pronounced our visitor fit to leave us. He had known for some time who the young fellow was, and having, like all the country-side, heard strange stories of Angry, was much pleased that we gave him the freedom of Brandon so long.

No word was sent to Sir Rupert of his heir's illness or return.

"He has not shown so much solicitude," said the boy, reddening, "that we need consider him in the matter, nor is he likely to find the joy of my return too great a shock."

The boys did not seem to understand at all that with their friend's going the pleasant friendship must come to an end. Aline postponed telling them so till he should be gone, and there was a sadness in hearing them make their plans for the future which should include him. At such times he would say nothing, only look his pitiful appeal at Aline, who would refuse to answer his eyes.

At the last he made a last appeal that we should not exclude him.

"You could only come by concealing it from Sir Rupert," she made answer. "Don't you see that we couldn't endure that?"

A spark of hope leaped into his eyes.

"But if my grandfather were willing?"

"You don't know him," said Aline, "or you would not think it possible."

He went off in the station fly one day, with his beautiful Red Rover following, led by Lanty M'Goldrick from the village. As we turned into the house after watching him till the last glimpse faded in the long line of the avenue, we felt as sad as if someone had died. Only the boys still thought they were to keep their friend.

Aline told them afterwards, and at first they were sulky and inclined to be rebellious. Presently they saw she was right, and came back to their own sunny selves.

"Why, after all," said Hugh hopefully, "the old duffer won't live for ever."

"Any night," added Donald, "he and James Gaskin might burn up old Angry and themselves together."

"Donald!" cried Aline, shocked.

"I mean, of course, after Harry had had time to get out," said the culprit innocently.

The twins didn't say anything; it wasn't their way; but I think they missed their friend very much. They went about for some days, a forlorn-looking little pair, with their hands clasped tighter than ever. They were

not quite consoled till a day came that brought a beautiful box of games, and a pair of most ingenious sister-dolls, which could only be from Mr. De Lacy. Hugh got a new gun and Donald a fishing-rod on the same momentous day. They wanted to write and thank their friend, but Aline thought it better not, as she was not sure of the letter reaching the right hands. He had said he would expect no answer, in the brief note he had written to Aline from Angry, and which had ended: "Tell Miss Hilda and Miss Esther that I shall never forget them".

After that there was silence.

We often wondered how things were going with him, and if he were getting well in that gray old house that frowned ever blacker and blacker in the gorge of the mountain. But we had no means of knowing, and our lives gradually went back to their old uneventfulness.

I often laughed at myself about my fear as to Esther's heart. Why, she of the whole family missed young De Lacy least. She never, like the rest of us, wondered what he was doing, or if he had forgotten us. But this would not have set my mind at rest, only that the strange beauty which had come to her of late seemed to ripen and glow more, day by day. With her plainly it was no case of

Only my Love's away,
I'd as lief the blue were gray.

In the spring I took a cold, and was for a time more or less kept to the house. Esther as usual took her walks

abroad, and would bring me home primroses from the wood, or wild anemones, daffodils, and violets from the cloisters of the old abbey. She was everything that was sweet to me, as always, yet I noticed that she was less dependent on me than of old. In the old days, if I could not be with her she, too, kept the house. But I could not grudge her her walks, seeing how she came in from them full of life and vigour, and would lay her cold, fresh cheek to mine with such compassion for my house-bound state.

Then something happened that put Harry De Lacy for the time out of all our minds, for with us Brandons blood is thicker than water in a truer sense than it is of most families.





CHAPTER X.

FROM THE NIGHT AND THE STORM.

FOR some time Pierce's letters had been irregular, and when they came had been the merest scraps, very unsatisfactory to Aline, one could see, though she often said that, moving about so much as he did, Pierce couldn't be expected to write letters like a home-keeping woman.

Then had come a couple of months of silence, during which Aline fretted visibly, at least during the latter portion of the time, for of course she did not begin to worry at once, and there had been the distraction of young De Lacy's accident and convalescence in the house.

It was now April, and blithe, beautiful weather. The smaller trees were all in leaf, and the bigger ones were cloudy with the coming leafage. It was sunny every day, with a touch of east wind, which brought the most beautiful colours on Brandon Hill, bronzes and crimsons and golds, instead of his usual soft azures. The kitchen-garden was a forest of white blossom, and the apple-buds were pushing open a little rosier every day. I was getting rid of my cold, and was out walking every day on the sheltered side of the house, in the gardens, or on the grassy terrace overlooking the rose-garden.

I came on Oona one day in the kitchen-garden picking spinach into her apron.

"Why, Oona," I said, "you are going to give us an early dish. I thought you wouldn't be putting it on the table for a fortnight yet."

"There'll be a stranger to dinner, Miss Hilda. Three nights running I've dreamt of a man dressed in black, but the face of him I couldn't see, coming in over the threshold stone, and this morning there was a stranger in my tea-cup, so there's someone coming over the hill."

"And you've picked the spinach because of your dreams."

"Yes, and killed a pair of chickens. One of them was a pullet, but as she'd learned to crow it couldn't be lucky to keep her. Chickens, an' a bit o' bacon, an' a dish o' spinach is good feeding for anybody, if it was Miss Freda or Master Pierce even."

"Your banshee never came to anything, Oona," I said.

"The year's not out, Miss Hilda," she answered solemnly.

But I was not to be depressed by Oona's superstitions this bright spring morning, so I went off laughing, and left her shaking her old head in its snowy cap-frills.

The day passed without event, and it was late afternoon. Esther was still out, and I had thought I would go a little way to meet her, so after Aline had wrapped me up in a soft old Indian cashmere shawl, and enjoined on me not to go too far, I started off down the avenue. I went farther, perhaps, than I intended, for I expected Esther to come in sight at every turn. Anyhow all at

once I felt a little tired, and so sat down on the mossy trunk of a fallen tree to wait for her. The evening was rosy now, and translucent yellow, and palest green, and Brandon had flushed rosy pink, and was wearing the evening star in his hair.

"If she doesn't come soon," said I, "I must turn back."

And just at that moment I heard, in the silence, wheels and the trotting of a horse's hoofs on the road. The sound was coming nearer every minute, and was sufficient of a novelty to attract my attention, for, as I have said before, the road to Brandon led nowhere but to Brandon, the only exit from it, after Brandon gates, being a horrible rutty boreen, too narrow for anything but the smallest donkey-cart.

"Hullo!" said I to myself—I have learnt slang from the boys, you see—"Oona's stranger, for a ducat!" and I began to feel rather excited.

With the sensitive hearing of a country-girl, I could follow the sound of the car through its many windings and turnings, and could even catch the murmur of voices when the turning was towards Brandon, and not away from it, or in a hollow.

Presently there was a pause, and I knew the car had stopped at the gate, and that the driver was leading his horse through, for our last lodge-keeper, Larry Hefferman, had been dead two years, and we had not filled his place. Then I heard the car coming on towards me up the avenue.

I listened in strained expectancy, still keeping my

place on the log. It came nearer and nearer. Then it turned on to the long straight bit at the other end of which I was sitting. There was one person on it besides the driver—a tall man, much muffled, despite the clemency of the April evening. As they came near me I saw him lean across and speak to the driver. Then the car stopped and he alighted slowly and painfully, and, taking a bag from the seat, came on to where I was sitting, while the car turned round and drove slowly off.

The man came up to me and stopped. I could scarcely see his face, for the muffling and the soft hat. But there was something familiar about it, and yet unfamiliar, which made me jump up, trembling slightly.

“Why, it is little Hilda!” said the man, and with the sound of his voice uncertainty vanished.

“Oh, Pierce,” I cried, “Pierce! How glad Aline will be!” And then I added, nearly in the same breath:

“But what have you been doing to yourself? You are not the Pierce that went away. Have you been ill, Pierce?”

He stooped and kissed me and laughed.

“Five years make a difference in a man’s looks, little woman,” and then he coughed a hard dry cough, which seemed to be tearing through flesh and bone.

“And how are they all? How is Aline? And you and Essie, and the twins, and the boys, and Freda?”

He pushed the soft hat off his head, drew a long breath, and looked all around him. Five years! Ah! it might have been twenty-five, so great was the difference.

This was not our Pierce, this hollow-eyed, gaunt-cheeked, white-lipped stranger. He looked taller too by a head, but that might have been because he was very thin.

"Dear Heaven!" he said, "how sweet it is to be at home! How often I have longed for a sight of old Brandon there, and to smell these delicious woods!"

He patted my hand, which he still held, softly.

"Come along, little girl, let us get home. I've been ill, and am ordered to be out only in the sun. How fortunate that you should have been mooning down here! I didn't want to go in on Aline suddenly, with this sick man's face."

So he did know that he was looking very ill. What matter? Home air and tender nursing and good feeding would soon make him the old Pierce again.

He would have taken up his bag, but I pushed away his hand from it.

"One of the boys will run down for it," said I. "It is as safe till they fetch it as the Bank of Ireland."

There was still no sign of Esther, and we walked on towards the house. We met no one to be surprised at my return with a stranger's arm about me. Poor Pierce! Being so near me, I could hear the painful catching of his breath as he walked, and now and again he had to pause to recover himself.

The hall-door stood open as usual, and I brought him into the drawing-room, which was unoccupied, and to a comfortable chair. He sank into it without a word, but a quivering sigh told me how delicious its restfulness was.

"Now rest," said I, "and I will fetch Aline."

"You will tell her, little Hilda?"

"Yes; I will tell her that you have been ill, and have come home to be made well."

But all the way upstairs Oona's story of the banshee would haunt me, though I put out two hands to drive it away.

I found Aline writing labels for the rhubarb and parsnip wine Oona was making. She looked up at me with a questioning smile, and I noticed that she was not looking well. I sat down on the arm of the chair and kissed her ear.

"What is it?" she said. "Have you had a nice walk, and found Essie as you expected?"

"I didn't wait for her. I—I found news."

Her eyes opened wide and startled.

"News!" she repeated after me. "Of Pierce? It could only be of Pierce. What news, Hilda? Not bad news?"

"Good news, darling."

"Oh, Hilda, he is coming home! I know by your face. Tell me. Oh . . . he is come!"

"He is come," said I; "but wait, don't rush away like that. He has been ill, and has come home to get well. I was to tell you he was looking ill. You mustn't be startled at the change in him, nor startle him."

But Aline was already on her way to the door, and I followed her as fast as I could. After all, she would have time to get over the shock of his appearance

gradually, for now the kindly twilight would soften it down.

She went straight to the drawing-room, and I followed her, with an irrational fear lest she might want me. I saw Pierce stand up and lean on a near table, as if he felt faint. Then Aline put her arms round him with a sharp cry of love and pity, and I went out and closed the door.

Half an hour later Pierce came into the dining-room, and was installed in a big chair by the brisk little wood-fire, which had been lit because the nights turned chilly. He had had a wash and a brush-up, and looked better than when I had seen him first, and because he had been ill there was a little table set beside him, to which we carried the dainty bits of the chicken and the delicacies which Oona had hastily served up.

The young ones, of course, could not see how woefully Pierce was changed, which was a relief to us. Now that the lamp was lit I could mark the changes in his face. He had left us a sunny-hearted, sunny-faced boy. Now some immense trouble had drawn a myriad fine lines on the skin that had been so smooth. When, for a moment, it relaxed into quietness, it wore a curiously tragic expression. More than illness had been at work on that face. I, in my dim corner, wondered and wondered what the years had held for him to change him so greatly.

Aline had taken the shock of his changed looks well. I think her secret fear for him out in the briers and

thorns of the world had been so great, that to have him at home was for the time being joy enough. He himself seemed to think that all he needed to get well was Brandon, and she was only too glad to believe him.

And now Oona came to our help with all the knowledge and love that is in her faithful old heart. After a night's rest, Pierce, who seemed overjoyed to be back again, was for all sorts of exertions and expeditions, as if he were a strong man. But Oona put down her foot.

"Breakfast in bed, Miss Aline," she said, "and if the day's fine an' warm you can get down the little sofa Miss Hilda had when her foot was bad, an' when Mr. Pierce is dressed he can lie on it in the verandy. He'll have to be stronger before he goes racketin' an' tearin' round the place like them young colts o' boys."

Aline acquiesced silently, but when she was telling Pierce the arrangements that had been made for him, she added:

"You must rest well, you see, after the fatigue of the voyage, and be patient, and do as Oona bids you."

He laughed with some of his old merriment.

"I have always done as Oona bid me. And though I feel as strong as a horse this morning, she is probably right. I used to think, on the way home, that I should never be able to get rest enough."

After that the days passed, and Pierce seemed to have accepted the invalid's part even gratefully. I would have said he was quite content, except that once or twice he reproached himself for being an expense to us.

"I am a useless beggar, little Hilda," he said to me one day when I was alone with him, "and I am bitterly ashamed to have come home empty-handed. I fought against that as long as I could,—so long that it was near being a case of never coming home at all."

"Oh, Pierce, that would have been the real cruelty and the real wrong!" I cried out.

"I felt that, Hilda. I thought it would be the cruellest wrong of all if I were to die out there, and leave Aline the heritage of that eternal sorrow. I kept hoping that things would be better. Indeed, Hilda, I endured much before I made up my mind to come. Yet I always knew that, in a certain contingency, I would come, and for that I kept my passage-money inviolate, even when I was starving."

"Starving, Pierce?"

"Yes, child, starving,—like many a better man. Privation paved the way for sickness with me. But you will not tell Aline, nor anyone else. I don't want to squirm under my punishment, which I richly deserved. And I would not have Aline's tender heart wrung afterwards to think upon such things."

"She need never know," I said. "We will make you well, Pierce, and Aline will be happy."

Then I saw a light of exaltation break over his face.

"Life and death are in God's hands, little one," he said, "and if it is death for me, I shall not repine. It may happen to a man to save his soul alive in the very gates of death."

I said nothing. With that light on his face I could not talk of death as if it were the last evil.

"I have known worse than death," he went on dreamily, "but the knowledge shall die with me. God knows it is no merit of mine that I did not give my immortal soul for the asking. I have been snatched out of the gates of hell, little Hilda, and shall I be afraid of the Valley of the Shadow? Ah! there are terrible things in the world out there, crueller than wolves, deadlier than serpents."

We were silent for a time. Pierce had turned his face away, and when he looked at me again I could have thought there were tears in his eyes, but perhaps it was because I was crying myself.

"You see, there is nothing to be sad about," he said softly, "even if I am very ill. There is more joy in heaven,—ah, yes! and if there is joy in heaven, is there not cause for joy on earth? Believe me, child, there is no real sadness, no real sorrow on earth, except sin. All else that seems sad to us is because we see as in a glass, darkly."

I never found Pierce in this mood again. And I believe I was the only one to whom he said so much, for he had the tender compassion for Aline that would not leave her the memory of great sorrow.

Only once afterwards did he touch upon those years.

"Desmond would have saved me, Hilda," he said suddenly one day,—“and I would not be saved. When I am gone I want you to write to Desmond, and tell him

that I knew at last he was right, and that I died loving and thanking him. You will do that for me, Hilda?"

I said I would do it, and he was satisfied. It was curious that he should have chosen me for his confidant about such things. I know he did not talk to Aline, close as the bond was between them, as if he did not expect to live.

Good old Oona surpassed herself in those days after Pierce came home. I had rather feared her superstitions, the superstitions the peasants love; but if she felt them she did not impart them to me. She was indefatigable in compounding dainty dishes to tempt Pierce's weak appetite, and she brought out of her stores of knowledge wonderful recipes for healing and strengthening.

But as the days turned round to summer, Pierce did not grow stronger.





CHAPTER XI.

A FAIRY GODMOTHER

OLD Dr. Devine had seen Pierce soon after his return, very much against our invalid's wishes. He had not enlightened us much, nor given us much comfort.

"Go on as you are doing," he had said to Aline in his fat, comfortable way. "Plenty of port wine and fresh eggs, and keep him from taking cold."

But so much we had known before, and at Pierce's earnest request we had troubled Dr. Devine no further.

"Hilda," said Esther to me one day, "do you remember that when your foot was so bad Aline sold her collet to get you the best doctor that could be procured for money?"

"Could I forget it?" said I.

"Well, don't you think that something ought to be done for Pierce in the same way?"

"Yes," said I, "but how are we to raise the money? I do think Freda ought to help us."

"I believe Aline thought the same thing when she wrote to her all about Pierce's illness, but Freda evidently thinks differently. Do you remember how generous Freda once was?"

"Yes," said I wisely, "but then she was a girl. I believe she has grown selfish for that child. There, I have said it, and it is the first time any of us have. What is the use of our going about wondering at Freda in our secret hearts and shutting our lips upon it?"

"It is strange about her. However, Hilda, if she will not help, we must. We must sell our sapphires."

"Would they bring much? They are heavy and old-fashioned."

"I daresay they are rather ugly, but they will sell for the stones. We won't ask Aline. She would sell her own things, but she would feel our parting with ours. Once it is irrevocable, she will be glad."

We went upstairs and took out our *parures*, and looked at them with a little melancholy. They were our only jewels of value, and though we never had any occasion for wearing them, we had always felt that some day the occasion might come. Now that we were going to give them up they seemed beautiful, glowing deeply against the white velvet of their cases. We had each a necklet and pendant, a brooch and ear-rings, and a bracelet. Esther, in addition, had a little tiara of the stones set round with small diamonds.

"But how are we to sell them?" I asked.

"I have thought of that," said Esther. "If we ask Mr. Benson he will sell them for us to the Dublin goldsmith from whom he bought his new altar-plate. There, shut them up, Hilda dear. We have not needed them all the years, and we are not going to miss them now."

She went off to see Mr. Benson that afternoon, with the cases in brown paper under her arm. We felt like a pair of conspirators; but Pierce must have his doctor and all the things he needed, and I think the sacrifice made us both happy, once it was over and done with.

Mr. Benson accepted the commission when it had been explained to him that the things were really and truly our own, and that there was such sore need for money at Brandon.

A few days later Esther went over to the Rectory for the goldsmith's answer. It was nearly dinner-time when she came back, and I was washing my hands upstairs in my own room when she came in, still wearing her hat, and laid down something on the table. My heart sank, for it looked uncommonly like our jewel-cases, only not quite so thick.

"Ah!" said I to myself, "so the old things were worthless after all; and Pierce must go without his doctor, and his port wine, and game, and all the things that may save his life!"

But Esther, who had not spoken, had locked the door and returned to the table. She had bright spots of excitement in each cheek, and as I dried my hands on the towel and came towards her she put down a heavy, lumpish parcel on the table, and, reaching for my scissors with a hand that trembled, she cut the cord, opened a little bag that was inside, and spilt the contents on the table. I was so near screaming out at the sight that I had to clap both hands on my mouth. There, on the

table, glittering before me, was a substantial heap of sovereigns—a great heap, it seemed to me at the first glance.

“One hundred pounds!” said Esther in an exultant voice. “Actually a hundred pounds for the old sapphires! That dear Mr. Benson went to the bank and cashed the cheque, and got it all in gold, knowing it would delight us so.”

“And to think they’ve been lying there so uselessly all those years!” said I.

“They could never have served us as they will now,” said Esther again; and we both stood gloating over that heap of sovereigns as though we were a pair of misers.

Then Esther began putting back the gold again in the little bag which had held it. When she had drawn the strings and wrapped it in its outer covering of brown paper my eye fell on the other square-shaped parcel.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Oh, Hilda,” said Esther, rather guiltily, “Mr. Benson thought we would not sell both *parures* till we saw what one would fetch! He guessed the stones were valuable. So I have brought back yours.”

Well, for the moment I felt nothing but vexation, which quite put out of my mind the fact that it had been rather a wrench to give up the sapphires.

“You wretched, mean girl!” said I. “You know it was my place to give the sapphires, seeing what Aline had done for me. You should have kept yours. What use are jewels to me, seeing that even if we were asked to balls and such things I would have no place there?”

"Hush, hush, Hilda!" said Esther in her gentle way. "Your jewels may be wanted later; and in any case mine were the more valuable, and brought in the bigger sum."

Now I'm afraid this makes us seem rather unnatural, for girls, by nature, love their pretty things; only, you see, as we were both well on in the twenties, and had never had an opportunity of wearing jewels, and never seemed likely to have, the things were not of so much account in our happiness. Besides, money was wanted so sorely that the old jewels counted for very little by comparison.

"I shall never need mine, never!" said Esther, with conviction.

"And in any case mine are yours," added I.

Then we went down to Aline and spilled the money in her lap. We were a little nervous about acting on our own responsibility, so we blurted the story out in a great hurry; and then, when Aline would have held up horror-stricken hands at the loss of the sapphires, we simply cried out, "It is for Pierce, you know, for Pierce," and so silenced her.

We kept from Pierce the secret of how the Dublin doctor's fee was paid, but all the same he was vexed and disturbed when he heard that we had sent for him. The great man came and went, and left us sadder than before. Whatever hopes we had had from his visit were dissipated in thin air after he had gone.

"I can give you no hope of your brother's ultimate recovery," he had said to Aline. "Constant and tender

care may keep him with you a little while, but the mischief is too deep-rooted for our skill to reach."

He had looked at her compassionately out of his stern gray eyes and pressed her hand in silence. After all, we had known it all the time, had known we were only buoying ourselves up with faint hopes.

"How long?" said Aline.

"Perhaps a twelvemonth," said the doctor, "perhaps not so long."

After he had gone we left Aline alone, as she asked us. She wanted to gain composure before she went back to Pierce. In her little octagon room, holy with the atmosphere of her prayers and long patience, we left her to gain courage and comfort from the Source. Our hearts were heavy for her, but we knew her Comforter would not fail. Meanwhile I went back to Pierce with a foot that lagged and a face that vainly strove for a show of cheerfulness.

It was June then, and Pierce was out every day, sitting in a comfortable wicker-chair under the shade of limes. He certainly looked less ill than when he had come home, but that might be because he was rested and refreshed now, and his mind at ease to be among his own people.

I sat down on the rug at his feet, being glad not to meet his eyes, but he leant forward and pulled my face round towards him. As he did so I lost my hard-won composure.

"What, tears!" he said, and smiled. He was the only one of us had heart to smile that day.

"The doctor's been telling you that I've got my marching orders?" he said.

I bowed my head silently.

"I wish you could come over here and stand beside me"—he spoke as if an immense gulf divided us,—“and see from my side how death looks. There would be nothing to cry about, little Hilda.”

I answered by a half-stifled sob.

"My only trouble is," he said, "that I cause you all sorrow. I meant to have done so much for this old place and all of you once, and I have done nothing but drag myself home to be a burden on you all, and then to grieve you by my death. And yet if you could know, little Hilda, how impossible it was for me to take up life again in the old way, you would understand how glad I am to go."

Still I could not answer him.

He spoke again with a curious strength and will that for the moment made his voice like the voice of one in health.

"There must be no more doctors, Hilda. Even if it comforts Aline I cannot have it. You must let me go quietly. God knows that in being here I have more happiness than I deserve."

I followed his eyes as they gazed around. The great lime was flinging wavering shadows on the grass. The sun was very hot, but under the shelter of the tree a cool wind had strayed in, and flapped about with half-folded wings. And facing Pierce as he sat was Brandon, blue as forget-me-nots.

A day or two later we had accepted with what resignation we might the knowledge that Pierce's time with us was to be but short. It is wonderful how one grows used to such things. Troubles that, imagined, we would have said we could not endure, we accept in a few hours, and go about, not only living, but carrying out the usual routine of life, as if the thing had always been so.

About a week after the Dublin doctor's visit there dropped a new friend out of the clouds. I was with Aline one day, and she was snipping off withering roses into a basket from the bushes close to where Pierce was sitting. To us came the newest of our small handmaidens—for Oona keeps up an incessant change—in much trepidation, and holding a card between her finger and thumb. Aline took it, and looked at it in surprise. Then she walked up to Pierce.

"Why, Pierce," she said, "here is old Lady O'Brien come home to Annagower, and come to make a call. I thought she was dead long ago."

"So did I," said Pierce. "We used to call her the Fairy Godmother when we were small. I thought she was enormously old then."

"She has been out of these parts a long time," said Aline. "But I must not keep her waiting. However, I shall have to wash my hands. Hilda dear, would you mind going in to the old lady till I can come? I wish Esther were not out, for Lady O'Brien is her godmother."

"She has only gone to see Oona's cousin, Mary," said I, "and may come in at any minute."

I found a very tiny old lady sitting in the biggest chair in the drawing-room. She had a foreign-looking big black hood pulled over her face, out of which twinkled her bright eyes, set in a delicate little old white face.

"Well, my dear," she said, "which of the girls are you? and why didn't you come at once, instead of keeping me waiting?"

"I am Hilda, Lady O'Brien, and I came as quickly as I could. But we were at the far end of the rose-garden with Pierce when your card came, and I can't walk very quickly. Aline will be here in a moment. She was gardening, and had to wash her hands."

"Why can't you walk quickly?" snapped the old lady.

"I am a little lame," I explained.

"Now, how do you come to be that? Mary Brandon's children were born without blot or blemish. What mischief were you up to to lame yourself, child?"

"We went to the races without leave, and fell into a ditch on the way home."

"Indeed, then, you've been too much punished, for I've been doing things without leave all my life, and here I am with all my teeth and my eyesight, and my hair and complexion, at seventy years of age. But never mind," she added consolingly, "'tis only a pretty bit of a limp after all. Not so long ago it was fashionable to be a bit lame, because one sweet woman was so."

At that moment Aline came in, and was called over to kiss the old ivory face in its black hood.

"You're the image of your grandmother, my dear,"

said the old lady graciously; "and when we were both brides together we divided the county into factions about our beauty, though you wouldn't think it now to look at me. Eh, what?"

"This exclamation was addressed to me. I had just said in a low voice that I could well believe the old lady's statement. I repeated the speech, to her delight.

"Well done!" she cried. "You've a pair of eyes in your head, madam."

Then she turned to Aline in her quick way, which reminded me of a bird pecking.

"I suppose you wonder where I've come from after all those years?"

"I hope you've come back to Annagower to stay."

"To make my exit, my dear. I've been racketing all those years up and down the world, and now I've come back to 'make my soul'. Ireland's a pleasant place to die in."

"You don't look like dying," said Aline with truth.

"Nor feel like it, my dear; but I am an old woman—seventy years of age. I thought I'd like to lie beside poor Sir Peter at the last, though it's so long since he went he must have given up expecting me, poor man. But where's my girl?" she asked with startling suddenness; "I don't see her yet."

"Esther?" said Aline. "She is out, Lady O'Brien, but I hope she will be in before you go. Now, you'll have some tea," for at this moment little Annie appeared with the tea-tray, casting at the same time alarmed

glances at the old lady, who indeed looked exactly like a witch.

"If it's fresh and well-made, my dear, and you can give me cream with it. My doctor-man at Monte Carlo has absolutely forbidden me tea, so that if I am to ruin my stomach it must be for something worth having."

"You could have milk if you preferred it," suggested Aline.

"I haven't cut my second milk-teeth yet, my dear. Thank you, that looks very nice. Gebhardt, the doctor-man, was rather a fool. I often told him so. But, bless you, doctors must be saying something."

Lady O'Brien was graciously pleased to approve of the tea and the thin brown bread-and-butter, for which she displayed a most youthful appetite. When she had finished she dusted off the crumbs from her silk lap.

"Well, I suppose I must be going," she said, "for there are Daisy and Dobson both fast asleep in the sun, though I always tell them they'll get sunstroke one day."

We followed her gaze out to the space before the window, where a little basket phaeton stood, with an old pony, evidently asleep, and a fat coachman, also slumbering, as she had said.

"By the way," she said as she stood up, "where are all the others? Where is the boy who was next to you? A very handsome boy he promised to be. I should like to see him. I adore handsome boys."

"He is in the garden, Lady O'Brien," answered Aline, sadly, "and I am sure he would like to see you. But he

is not strong." Her face quivered suddenly. "Indeed his lungs are affected, and we fear he will never be very well again."

The old lady's manner changed quite suddenly to one of the utmost kindness and sympathy.

"Indeed, my dear," she said earnestly, "I am very sorry for that. The young should be well and happy. You think I might see him, hey?"

"I am sure you might," said Aline, smiling. "A visit from you could do nothing but good."

So the old lady took her silver-headed cane, and pouring out a flood of memories as she went, accompanied us to the shady seat where Pierce was sitting, with my little gray-headed Paudeen comfortably curled up at his feet.





CHAPTER XII.

A SECRET ROOM.

I WENT before to set a seat for the old lady, and to tell Pierce she was coming; and indeed I had no need to hurry myself, for at every bush she stopped and appeared to be reciting with animation some memory of her youth. At last she caught sight of Pierce and quickened her pace.

"Well, young man," she said as she took the chair beside him, "the last time I saw you you were in white frilled trousers and a petticoat."

But though she said it to make us laugh, I could see that the shrewd old eyes looked at him with great compassion. Poor Pierce brightened up immediately.

"And the last time I saw you, Lady O'Brien, you were the toast of the county and the acknowledged reigning beauty."

"Hear the boy," said the old lady; "he was five years old, and I was near my fifties."

She took up his hand and patted it as if he were yet five.

"They tell me you're not strong. Dear, dear, how did





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“WHAT A FIGURE OF A MAN YOUR GRANDFATHER WAS! . . .
I MIGHT HAVE BEEN YOUR GRANDMOTHER!”

that come? You were a beautiful strong child as I remember you."

"He went seeking his fortune in Africa," said Aline quickly, "and took cold, and was neglected."

"Dear, dear!" said the old lady again, managing to get a great deal of tender kindness into the simple ejaculation. Then she passed easily to other subjects, seeing that we could hardly bear this.

"How this garden brings me back things! Not things I'm going to tell you children about. What a figure of a man your grandfather was! I remember walking by his side in this very garden, and he wore a maroon silk coat and silver-gray stockings. Ah, the men have no such calves to show nowadays!"

She shook her old head for a minute or two.

"There," she said, "I might have been your 'grandmother. And poor Peter had never a calf to him at all; he was beef to the heels, as they say, and he born into the time of small clothes too. What's become of that rascalion De Lacy?"

"He still lives over there at Castle Angry, but he is seldom seen, I believe. He keeps within his own walls," said Aline.

"He hasn't found the grace of God yet?"

Aline shook her head.

"Well, well. He was always a bad lot, was De Lacy. I must drive over some day and give him a bit of my mind. He was in love with your grandmother, but I think he had a bit of a soft place in his heart for me too."

"It wouldn't be safe, Lady O'Brien. Sir Rupert lives in almost savage isolation, at least he did up to quite recently, with barred gates and bloodhounds walking about inside."

"Like an opera," said the old lady, delightedly. "But why do you say up to recently? Have you any hope that he has mended his ways?"

Aline told her then of young De Lacy's accident and of his determination to stay at Castle Angry at all costs.

"There must be something in the boy," she commented. "I must have him over to see me after I've been there. Tut, tut, I'm not afraid of De Lacy or his dogs. He'll keep them off me, I'll go bail."

Just then Esther came in view, coming towards us down the long straight path.

"Here is Esther now, Lady O'Brien," I said.

The old lady drew out a pair of glasses attached to a long tortoise-shell stick, and levelled them at poor Esther.

"H'm, h'm!" she said, apparently satisfied. "So that's my girl! I have no fault to find with her."

Indeed she would have been exacting if she had, for Esther's confusion only added to her beauty. When she had reached us, the old lady enfolded her in a warm embrace.

"I suppose you've never thought of your godmother, my dear, and small blame to you. I don't believe you've heard of me since I gave you your christening-mug. An old hunk of a godmother, surely—hey?"

"Never mind," she went on, without waiting for an

answer; "I must do what I can in the time that's left me. Now I'll tell you what"—to Aline—"I'm going to come over and take this young man for drives whenever I can and it's fine; when I can't, I'll send Dobson, who's eating his head off, and Daisy, who's no better. There, don't thank me. It will be a blessing to give the lazy creatures something to do. And you must all come over to me as soon as I've shaken down a bit. Now, good-by, good-by, my dears!"

She kissed us all affectionately, only extending to Pierce a tiny bejewelled hand, which he, understanding what was expected of him, kissed reverentially. The old lady looked pleased as she went off with Aline, and as for us, why, she had given us enough to talk about for a week.

Aline told us afterwards how nice she had been about Pierce.

"Has he had the very best doctors?" she had asked. "If it is any question of expense you will trust the oldest friend you have."

"Oh, indeed, Lady O'Brien," said Aline, much touched, "I would trust you about anything. But we have had Dr. Lee-Comyns. I believe he is as good as any man living."

"And he suggested nothing? A sea-voyage now? Wouldn't that be the thing?"

"The doctor thought not. He seemed to think the mischief was too far gone. He said we could do nothing but take care of him and make him as happy as possible

for . . . the time. Indeed, Lady O'Brien, expense would not stand in the way. We would sell everything we have if it could save Pierce."

"There, there, my dear. Well, if I can do anything you may depend upon me. To think that that lad and I are taking the same way together, the way that leads away from you all. For me it is all right; I have lived. But for him—poor boy, poor boy!"

"He is quite happy about it, Lady O'Brien."

"Then maybe he'll teach me his happiness. I've been a selfish woman, living for no one but myself all my days, and now at seventy I feel as attached to the world as if I was twenty-five; aye, and more attached. I'm a worldling, my dear, a worldling to the core."

Every day after that, unless the rain fell, the little wicker phaeton would come rattling up to Brandon, with or without its mistress. If Lady O'Brien did not come herself, one of us filled the vacant place in the phaeton, but I am not at all sure that Pierce, though he is so affectionate, did not enjoy the old lady's society more than ours.

A curious and touching friendship sprang up quickly between them. They never seemed to tire of each other's company; and the old lady's shrewd, humorous, slightly biting comments on men and things, and her glimpses of the world she had left behind her, seemed to afford great delight and refreshment to our poor invalid. It was strange to see him so humble, so devout, so cheerfully resigned to the Will that was taking him in the flower of

his youth, yet looking at the world through the eyes of tolerant laughter, with which the world-worn old woman presented it.

"The boy is teaching me how to die," she said to Aline in one of her serious moments.

And one could scarcely doubt that she was helping him in the last moments of his life, which it was his desire and his will to leave with cheerful courage, and a trust too great for sadness. We all grew very fond of Lady O'Brien in those days. She had come in the nick of time for Pierce.

She brought us all out of our shells. Once we dined at Annagower, Aline and Esther and I, but only once, for Aline would be with Pierce all she could, and she did not like to leave him a portion of the evening alone. But we often went to tea, Pierce and Aline driving, and we following, Esther and I and the boys; and hugely the boys enjoyed it, for Lady O'Brien had a most generous idea of catering for boyish appetites.

She was still in process of settling down at Annagower, and still many of the pictures and curios she had gathered up stood in their cases unpacked. Part of the house was yet in the hands of workmen, for it had got damp and uninhabitable during the years of its mistress's absence.

It was, or is, a long, low, pleasant house, with a green porch, and roses nodding at the little windows. The room which I associate most with Lady O'Brien is a low-ceiled panelled room, covered with Indian matting, which looked so cool that hot summer. White curtains hung

before the windows, through which the light came green, because the gardener had been forbidden to prune the roses and honeysuckle outside. The room was full of the most comfortable chairs all petticoated in green and white chintz, and there was old china behind the glass lattices of the corner cupboards.

The twins used to say that there was no tea like Lady O'Brien's, and I'm sure we all agreed with them. That was an ideal tea-table, to my mind, and we were always so hungry after our walk. Her continental life had not taught our old lady to scrimp about honest eatables. Delicious pink ham and cold fowl were flanked by thin bread-and-butter, and strawberries and cream, and honey and marmalade, and hot home-made cream-cakes, and boiled eggs for those who liked them. And the tea, so hot and fragrant, with delicious rich cream. Then our hostess, though she ate little herself, expected us to eat much, and was so delighted at our enormous appetites. Even the twins did not scandalize her, and how they could eat so much after feasting on the raspberries and strawberries in the garden, was beyond me to say.

"Young people should eat," she would say, wagging her old head—"eat and grow: that is all young people should be asked to do."

I really think that she quite put Esther and myself on a level with the boys and the twins in those matters.

Then, when we were leaving, we would find in the pony-carriage a little hamper packed with the dainties we had been forced to leave.

"Martha would be so vexed if she thought her sweet things weren't appreciated", was the regular excuse. Martha was Lady O'Brien's invaluable cook, housekeeper, and personal attendant; and the two had been together years out of mind, though Martha was but a personable woman of fifty.

Martha, indeed, would have been sorely hurt if any of her confections had had to go to the kitchen to be devoured by Curtis, the page-boy, whom Martha always referred to as "that dratted boy", or fat Dobson, or the pretty housemaid, who was the old servant's *bête noire*.

Then there was no end to the dainties that were sent for Pierce, to Oona's mingled jealousy and delight.

Once, when we had been visiting at Annagower, Lady O'Brien brought me upstairs, alone, in a rather mysterious way.

"You can keep a still tongue in your head?" she asked as we went along the low corridor under the thatch.

"I think so, Lady O'Brien. I have that reputation," said I modestly.

"Well, you shall see my secret room," she said.

A little farther she opened the door of a room, and motioned me to step inside. The room was fresh from the hands of the workmen. It had a green-painted ceiling following the lines of the roof, so that it was very low on the side where the gable-window opened. It had been papered in pink, a pretty paper with roses on it, and the woodwork was white. A little brass bed, hung with green and pink, stood in the corner, and there was pretty

white-enamelled furniture, and several low wicker chairs were covered with the rosy and green chintz.

I sighed with delight as I took a long, long look.

"You think it pretty?" inquired the old lady, who had been watching me anxiously.

"Pretty! it is delicious."

"A girl would be happy in it, hey?"

"A girl would adore it," said I.

"It would be all her own. Her little bed would be made, soft and white, and her books would be in the book-shelf, and she would come upstairs to find her little pink dressing-gown on the back of a chair, and her little pink slippers to thrust her feet into, and a bunch of roses on the dressing-table, and all her little fal-lals about, and no one would bother or disturb her."

"She would be a very happy girl," said I, meeting the old lady's rapturous gaze.

"I always wanted a girl of my own. I would have known how to be good to one. But the Lord didn't see fit to send me any babies. I've got this little room ready, as if it were for the little daughter or granddaughter I never had. I think I shall have . . . a young lady . . . coming soon . . . on a visit."

Now I knew as well as if she had told me that all this was for Esther, but I did not betray my knowledge.

"Would you think now that she'd be so happy that, when she came on a visit, she'd be willing to stay altogether?"

"I should not be at all surprised," said I.

After all, there was no reason why Esther shouldn't come to Lady O'Brien and be happy. She would not be far from us, and of late the close companionship that used to exist between Esther and myself had somehow lessened. Esther, more than of old, seemed to like to be alone, and I no longer knew all her thoughts and feelings as of old. I came out of the room with a little sigh, but as I met the bright, wistful old eyes, I nodded reassuringly.

"There can be no doubt at all about it," said I, "no doubt at all. If she could resist that room, she couldn't resist the love that made it ready for her. Not if I know what girls are made of."

"Thank you, my dear," said the old lady simply. "I feel that she is going to stay."

She locked the door and put the key in her pocket, and we rejoined the others. Of course I kept my own counsel about Lady O'Brien's secret room, and gave myself up more and more to the companionship of my books and papers. They, at least, would not fail me. And then I have always Paudeen, of whom I have been saying too little in this narrative.



CHAPTER XIII.

CINDERELLA.

THE summer had turned round to autumn before Lady O'Brien broached her project about Esther. I think she waited till she had us all bound fast to her by ties of affection and gratitude. Things were much the same with us, except that Pierce had grown a little thinner, a little more pinched and peaked like an old man, and a little weaker every day.

His couch now was in Aline's octagon room, and, though the autumn was a fine one, fires were pleasant. We were there one day, Pierce and I, and Paudeen at Pierce's feet. A little wood fire sparkled in the grate, though outside the world was full of brightness—brightness of blue sky and yellow sun, and golden and scarlet woods. The leaves were beginning to fall, and old Brandon's shoulders were visible now, where a month ago we could only see the top of his head.

I was restless, and kept going round the panelling, as I had so often gone fruitlessly, pressing the spines of every rose, and the leaves and buds, in search of the hiding-place I always said must be there. Pierce lay

watching me with contented eyes which had a spark of amusement in them.

"I am quite sure it is here," I said, pausing opposite to him. "Listen, doesn't the panel ring hollow?"

I tapped with my finger, and he listened.

"There may be only the wall behind," he said, "but it certainly does ring hollow."

"If there is a hiding-place it should be easily discovered," he said again. "I have always found a singular innocence in those contrivances."

Now each panel fitted in squarely, being carved separately and set into the wall, so that a door might be suspected of any one of them. I went tapping and pushing in a dissatisfied way round about the room, and finally came back again to the panel that rang hollow.

On the leaves in many places there were little beetles of the kind we call lady-birds. They had specially exercised my mind, for they stood much above the surface of the carving. But, after all, it was Pierce who discovered the little door, not I.

"Do you see that fellow about the middle of the left-hand side, Hilda?" he said. "Near your hand now? Yes, that is the one."

"I have tried him over and over, for he has tentacles, and the others have none."

"Try to twist him instead of pressing him."

I tried, and thought he moved ever so slightly. I tried again: yes, there was no doubt he turned with my hand, but I had little purchase on him.

"I know," said I. "I'll get Oona's hammer, and see what that will do."

The claw-end of the hammer just caught the little beetle. I gave it a wrench and a turn, and there was the click of a bolt. Then, a little clink, and the panel opened towards me. It was simply a door in the wall, where I had been looking for a sliding panel all the time.

I looked at Pierce with expectant triumph. He was nearly as excited as I. The light poured full into the little cupboard. There was an Indian box of lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold. A little gold key stood in it. I handed it to Pierce, and drew out next a pair of white gloves with tarnished gilt tassels at the wrist. Then a tiny riding-whip. Next a case containing a miniature of a handsome young man. That was all. Not a scrap of writing—not a word by which we could guess at what time the girl had lived who must have gone away so suddenly leaving all her treasures hidden in the wall.

I opened the lacquer box with a hand that trembled. Inside it was divided into little square boxes, surrounding a larger box in the middle.

"This first," said I, lifting the cover.

Within there was nothing but a faint perfumed dust in the corners, and a tiny bit of blue ribbon.

"Ah!" said Pierce. "All that remains of Dulcinea's breast-knot."

We opened another. Within was a tiny gold bodkin

and a thimble studded with turquoise. In another, an old vinaigrette. In a third a mother-of-pearl bobbin wound with green silk. In a fourth, a tablet of ivory, with a gold pencil. The last two were empty.

"So this is all your treasure-trove," said Pierce, looking down at the quaint box.

"Yes," said I, "aren't they lovely? I am so happy to have found them," for the romance of the discovery gratified me immensely.

"I don't quite think we have found all," said Pierce, who had been examining the box. "There must be a tray under here."

After a little search we found the tray, which slid outward. It was a flat receptacle for jewels, with, at one corner, a diamond-shaped box like those in the upper part.

"Garnets!" cried I, in an ecstasy when the tray had slid out. "They will look lovely on Esther, and will make up for her sapphires."

Fortunately Pierce was too interested to notice my slip. He took up the collar of garnets and looked at it.

"Exquisite setting," he said, turning it over and looking at the gold honey-combing at the back. "I wonder they put garnets in such a setting."

"Everything was worth doing well then," said I, lifting up the bracelets to match. The stones were laid on closely, almost like beads, except in the pendant, where a heart-shaped garnet was surrounded by diamonds. There was a whole set of the pretty things, including stars for the hair.

"Look at their soft fires," I cried, "how they will light up on Esther's creamy skin!"

"They are for Esther then?"

"Yes, I should like them to be for Esther. They are mine to give, Pierce, and . . . yours."

"Oh, I waive all claim to them, little girl! What should I do with garnets? I think there's no doubt that the jewels belonged to the lady who left them there, and you, I should say, are her residuary legatee."

"I shall give Aline the thimble and bodkin," said I, "and all the rest I shall keep myself."

"What, the tablet and the vinaigrette, and the whip and gloves and the portrait! Aren't you rather greedy? And the bobbin—I had forgotten the bobbin."

But I saw he was laughing, and did not justify myself.

"Hullo, there is something we have forgotten!" said he, lifting the little corner-box. It was detached from the rest, and inside was lined softly with silk. It held a lock of brown hair, tied with a piece of green silk. That was all.

I lifted the hair reverentially, and put it beside the brown head of the miniature.

"Ah!" said I, "but she should not have tied it with green silk. Green is so unlucky."

I put back all the things in their hiding-place, except the jewels, and again slid the bolt.

"Now," I said, "no one is to know the secret, not even Aline. I like to think it is mine, and yours."

But even as I said it I felt that it would not be his for long.

"You will hoard your own treasures there," he said, "and in a century or two another Hilda will come upon your locks of hair, and your love-letters, and the portrait of Him, and wonder about the girl who treasured those things."

"What nonsense!" said I, blushing. "I shall never have such things. What she will discover will be piles of rejected manuscripts; and she will peep inside, and think how very dull they are."

Presently Aline came in, and I told her of my discovery.

"You must make me a present of that one panel in the room," said I, "but I will never tell you which one it is."

"Very well, Hilda," she said, laughing. "I'm sure you've earned that panel by your years of industrious search."

"And here is your tribute," said I, putting the bodkin and thimble into her hand.

Just then we heard that Lady O'Brien was downstairs; and, pushing the garnets into Aline's work-basket, for I didn't want them to be seen till they were Esther's own, I went downstairs to ask the old lady to come up. Since the fire had been lit in the octagon room, and Pierce had sat there, it had come to be a general assembling-place for the family.

After she had greeted us all, and perched herself in the big chair by Pierce, she said:

"You won't guess, my dears, what brings me over to-day. It is to ask a favour, Aline. There is the County Ball a week from now, and I want to take my god-daughter."

"But Esther has never been to a ball!"

"So much I heard her say the other day. That's what put it into my head. Never been to a ball! Why, I had worn out hundreds of slippers dancing at balls, aye, and on the hearts of my partners, before I was Esther's age."

"I wonder if she would like it?" said Aline doubtfully. You see it was such an unheard-of thing in our lives, and there was Pierce so ill; and then how was she to get a proper frock?

"Of course she will like it, not being a saint like you, nor a literary woman like Hilda," said the old lady with sparkling eyes.

Just then Esther appeared in the doorway.

"Come here, my dear," said the old lady, "and kiss me. Now tell us, would you like to put on your glass slippers, and step into my pumpkin, and be whirled off to the Ball?"

"Better finish it, Lady O'Brien," said I, while Esther stood turning red and white with excitement. "Cinderella has no frock."

"Tut!" said the old lady; "that must be left to the fairy godmother. . . . What do you say, my dear?" to Esther.

"I've never been to a ball," said Esther nervously.

"Well, you're asked to one now, and what do you say?"

Esther said nothing, but looked from Aline to Pierce, wistfully.

"That settles it, Lady O'Brien," said Pierce, speaking for the first time. "Essie would plainly like it, and she must go. Thank you very much."

"About the dress," said Aline. "I don't think we need trouble you, our kindest of friends. I have a few lengths of silk somewhere, and we have a dressmaker who can make it up. . . ."

"I have a little Frenchwoman who'll do it in half the time, and with a thousandfold the wit. Put it up in a parcel with an old frock of Esther's, and throw it into my phaeton. There, my dear," impatiently, as Aline hesitated, "don't be too proud with the oldest friend you have in the world! There's a virtue in receiving as well as in giving."

So Aline yielded the point, and went off to find her silk. I wasn't quite satisfied about the silk myself, though it was a lovely bit of old gray silk gauze, powdered with violets. But gray is just the one colour that spoils Esther's looks; and then the garnets with those violets!

However, we can't have everything. I shall never forget Esther's face of joy when she came timidly to ask if I would lend her my sapphires, and I put the garnets into her hands, and told her they were her own.

The day of the ball Lady O'Brien sent over the phae-

ton for Esther with a note saying that if I would come over to dine and help her to dress, they would drop me at Brandon on the way back.

Now it was an ideal arrangement, for we were all anxious to see Esther dressed for the ball, and more especially the twins, for those little girls have a most amazing taste for finery, especially considering that they have hardly ever seen any.

When we arrived at Annagower, we found, instead of dinner, one of Lady O'Brien's delightful high teas, which was much more to our taste.

"I know girls always think dinner a dull meal," said our hostess. "It is only as they grow older that they discover how much consolation is to be found in it."

I noticed that the old lady looked a little excited, and I guessed that Esther was to be introduced to the pink room that evening, and I was right.

Towards the end of the meal, to which I did justice if Esther did not, Lady O'Brien left us, saying that she would have Martha's services first, and that when Esther rang, Martha would come and do her hair.

"But where am I to dress?" asked Esther.

"Hilda will show you the way to your room, my dear," said the old lady, going off rather hurriedly, as if to avoid any more questions.

Just as we had finished tea, the fat page-boy came in with a little covered dish, and set it before Esther.

"Her ladyship's love," he said, with a grin, "and she hopes Miss Esther will like the dish."

He whipped the lid off in a hurry, and there was a key with a little label to it.

"What is this?" asked Esther wonderingly.

"Better read the label," said I.

She read aloud, *The key of Esther's room, with her god-mother's love*; but looked as mystified as before.

"Never mind," I said, "come and see the room; I know the way,"—and off we went, to the disappointment of the page-boy, who would fain have seen the end of the affair.

I took a lighted candle from the hall-table and led the way upstairs. When we came to the door we found it locked, but Esther opened it with her key.

When the door swung back she gave a little cry of delight. There was a bright fire in the grate, and there were wax-candles, with rose-coloured shades, lit on the dressing-table. The room glowed rosily before us. I led the way to the dressing-table. On the glass was a piece of paper, on which was written in delicate, spidery, old hand-writing.

This room and all it contains, a gift to Esther Brandon, from her old godmother.

Esther gazed at the piece of paper with her eyes full of tears, yet shining, and her lips parted.

"What! all this for me!" she said incredulously.

"Yes," said I, "and more,"—for I had been using my eyes.

On the back of a big chair by the fire was a cosy little dressing-gown of soft pink stuff; and before the chair a

pair of pink silk-wadded slippers thrust themselves invitingly forward. We had hardly taken these in when our eyes wandered to the bed. I took a candle hastily from the dressing-table and held it high. There lay a most lovely frock, short-waisted and long-skirted, of palest yellow silk. Beside it a silk evening cloak, of the same colour. A little away stood a pair of silk shoes, flanked by silk stockings. Over the pillows lay an armful of under-linen, all laced and frilled in the daintiest way. Not one thing had been forgotten that Esther should wear that evening.

I left Esther staring, and went round the room peeping here and there. Nothing had been forgotten. On the toilet-table, or put away tidily in the drawers, were all the requirements of a girl's toilette,—hair-pins, pins, delicate soaps, perfumes, and all manner of things. Nothing seemed to have been forgotten.

"I feel like an enchanted princess," said Esther at last. "But, oh, Hilda, isn't it too much? Is it right to accept so much?"

"I wish Lady O'Brien were my godmother," said I.

Just then Martha knocked at the door to know if Miss Brandon would have her hair done, so we had to adjourn the discussion.

Martha was certainly a very clever maid. She piled Esther's hair in the most beautiful soft masses round her head, seeming to bring out the bronze shades that I think are so great a beauty in it. She did everything so quickly and expeditiously that in a very little while Esther was





M 436

"GARNETS!" SAID THE OLD LADY, PEERING CLOSELY.
"THEY ARE NO GARNETS."

dressed, and looking so grand and stately a young lady as she stood in the middle of her little room that I could hardly recognize her.

"I was to tell my lady when you were ready, Miss," she said. "She wants to see you before you put on your cloak."

And then she went out, closing the door.

I clasped on Esther's neck the collar and pendant of garnets, and put the stars in her hair. They looked lovely with the pale yellow, and Esther, standing there with her head bent, I really thought must be one of the most beautiful creatures possible.

I had hardly done before Lady O'Brien came in, exclaiming at the lateness of the hour, in order, I guessed, to cover her embarrassment. But Esther ran to her and put her arms round the little old lady and kissed her without a word; and the two seemed to understand each other perfectly.

I noticed that Lady O'Brien had carried in a little packet with her, and presently, when she put back Esther, and stood a little way off to look at her, I saw that it was a jewel-case. Her eyes rested on the garnets.

"I brought you a little string of pearls, child," she said, "but you have far more beautiful jewels, and they go better with your frock."

"They are garnets," said Esther, "and Hilda's gift to me. I should like to wear them."

"Garnets!" said the old lady, peering closely. "They

are no garnets. Take off the collar till I see it in the light."

I felt much abashed, for if the things were mere glass the pleasure of my gift to Esther would be gone. Lady O'Brien turned them this way and that way.

"H'mph! garnets indeed!" she cried contemptuously. "They are rubies, and exceedingly fine ones, if I know anything about it. There won't be a woman there to-night with finer jewels. I'm only afraid they're too fine for a girl."

Then Esther turned to me, and said that if the stones were indeed rubies that they must be mine and not hers; but I laughed at her, for to my mind and my love Esther is far above rubies, and I told her so.

But there was no time to continue the discussion, for just then the page-boy knocked at the door to say that the carriage was round; and Lady O'Brien took the cloak and wrapped Esther in it with great tenderness, as if she were her own child.

I noticed the pleasure and the gratitude shining in Esther's eyes, and said to myself that she would not refuse to become Lady O'Brien's adopted child.

What excitement there was at Brandon, where the twins sat demurely on chairs against the wall of the big bare drawing-room, and the boys stood on the rug pretending to feel bored, and Aline leant on the edge of Pierce's wheeled sofa, which had been brought in, all waiting for Esther's appearance! And peeping in at the door were Oona and her handmaidens.

I stood by the door, and whisked off Esther's cloak as she entered. I heard the twins' rapturous groan of delight, and the murmur of admiration from the others, and felt a share in Esther's triumph. Withal, she looked so sweet and modest, that we all felt she would never be spoilt by the world or its vain praises.

"But the frock!" said Aline, bewildered.

"Ah, my dear," said Lady O'Brien, who had a bright spot of excitement in each cheek, "that is a little liberty of mine; and nothing at all to what I shall be taking presently, nothing at all, my dear!"

"Come home early to-morrow, Essie," we cried, as the carriage drove off, "and tell us all about the ball."





CHAPTER XIV.

THE ROMAUNT OF THE ROSE.

WE expected Esther quite early in the morning to tell us how she liked the world, but the morning-hours passed, and lunch-time, and still she had not come.

However, just as little Annie was carrying in the big tea-tray—which the robust appetites of the younger Brandons demand—to Aline's room, we heard the little pony-carriage drive up, and in a minute or two we were welcoming our Cinderella home from the ball. Esther certainly looked a very different person from the radiant princess of last night. Our winter jackets have grown rather threadbare, without any great hope of new ones, and Esther's seemed to show unusually thin and skimpy in the western light which was pouring in on the tea-table and its hissing urn and pile of hot cream-cakes.

"Well," said Lady O'Brien emphatically, as she seated herself, "I have brought the belle of the ball to see you. Congratulate her, my dears!"

Esther blushed, and we all laughed, knowing Lady O'Brien's way; but the old lady was in earnest this time.

"I assure you there hasn't been such execution since I

came out myself at the very same Hunt Ball, and the next morning there were no less than three challenges over the last dance I had to give. Ah! my dears, there are no such men nowadays, as I'm never tired of saying. Sir Con O'Doherty winged Counsellor Slattery, and poor Tom Kinsella went with a ball in his knee from that day. And to think I passed them all by for Peter, that sat mum-chance in a corner and hadn't the spunk to approach me for a dance. All the better it was, for if he had he'd have torn my Limerick flounce in flitters, and that's something I'd never have forgiven."

She stopped to take breath, and Pierce put in:

"I hope Essie's been spilling no blood, Lady O'Brien."

"Only heart's blood, my dear boy. It's all that's ever spilt now, more's the pity."

"I suppose in your day they tapped the less important organs. You talk as if the seat of life were somewhat less important than—the nose, shall we say?"

"Hear the impudence of the boy!" cried the old lady, diverted. "I'll be after tapping your nose, my fine fellow, one of these days, if you give me any of your sauce."

"Well," said Aline, coming in, "I hope Essie had a very nice time."

"It's like your cold-bloodedness to put it that way, Aline," said the old lady; "but all I can say is that if Studderts and Ffrenches and Macnamaras come proposing for Esther, you just tell them that they'll have to wait till she sees more of the world and has had her pick and choice."

"Poor Essie! is she to become a worldling then?" said Aline, with a fond glance at Esther, who had kept silence, as was often her way, while we all chattered about her.

"You haven't taken off your jacket, dear. Aren't you hot?" she said, noticing that Esther still wore her outdoor things.

Esther looked shyly at her godmother.

"Well, Aline, my dear," said the latter, "to tell you the truth, Esther's not going to take off her jacket. She has promised, unless you and Pierce forbid it, and I don't think you will, to try what life is like with a cantankerous old woman."

"What! To live with you, Lady O'Brien?"

"Yes, my dear, to make me so happy, if it will not mean unhappiness to herself. There are so many of you here, Aline, and I am a lonely old woman with a very thirsty heart for a little girl of my own."

Aline looked at Pierce.

"Esther seems to have consented," he said, glancing at her half-fearful face. "Eh, Essie?"

"Yes, Pierce," Esther said in a low voice.

"Well, that being so, Aline, I don't think it's for us to forbid it. Esther's old enough to choose for herself."

Lady O'Brien turned round and gave him a hug which disarranged all his pillows, so that Aline had to come and shake them up again. As she did so I noticed that she touched Pierce's face lightly with her cheek. Perhaps Aline felt that he too would soon be going away

from her—a longer journey than across the valley to Annagower. When she had arranged him comfortably in silence she came back to her seat behind the tea-table.

“Very well, dear friend,” she said, “there is nothing for us to do but to thank you and say yes. But Esther will need some preparation.”

“None—all that is my affair, Aline. If you could know how I have longed to dress a girl.”

So Esther never took off her jacket at all, but sat there like a visitor paying an afternoon call, crumbling her cake into her saucer absent-mindedly.

But she was not going to leave me like that. I went over to her and put my arm round her neck.

“Come for one more talk, Essie,” I whispered, “while you are still ours and not Lady O’Brien’s.”

For I don’t think any of them felt Esther’s going as I did. We had always been so closely knit together, as close as the twins, or Aline and Pierce, and though of late the tie had been loosening a little, yet I had never felt that it could fray or grow thin. She came without a word.

When we had reached our own room upstairs we sat down on my bed side by side and twined our arms about each other. So we sat in silence for several minutes. At last Esther whispered in my ear, in her low passionate voice:

“We shall never be less to each other, Hilda,—never, never. Never, till all the seas run dry.”

But she was going away, and I felt that things would

not be quite the same again, and so I felt I could not speak, but a few very bitter tears—for I do not cry easily—came into my eyes, smarting and burning them.

“You will be happy, Essie,” I said, “and your happiness is what really matters. And you will make that dear old soul as happy as the day is long.”

“Happy?” she said, answering the first part of my sentence and not the last, “I do not know about happiness, Hilda. My dear old godmother would buy me the world if she could, but happiness may be beyond her reach.”

There was something in the way she said it that alarmed me, and stirred all my late misgivings about Esther.

“There is nothing, Esther?” I whispered. “You are not in trouble, dear?”

She looked at me half-startled.

“I spoke generally, Hilda. Every one has trouble.”

“Oh, is that all?” said I; but my mind was not the more at rest. Still, I did not want to surprise Esther’s trust. I drew myself a little away from her as I asked in a sprightlier voice:

“And the ball, Essie. Were you really so brilliant a success as her ladyship says? Tell me all about it now that we are here quietly by ourselves.”

“Oh, the ball!” answered Esther, coming back as from a distant country. “Yes, it was very fine, and every one was so kind. Even Lord Cahirduff would dance with me, though he has gout in his knee, and Lady Cahirduff, who is such a handsome woman, with gray hair and

bright eyes, said she couldn't make out how it was we were such strangers, that she had known our mother well, and asked if she might call. But Lady O'Brien said she was to come to Annagower one day, Tuesday, I think. Lord Cahirduff is such a dear old man, and pays such handsome compliments, and Lady O'Brien and he kept up a fire of jokes, and Lady O'Brien seemed to like him very much, for she slapped him with her fan several times, and called him an impudent fellow, just as she does Pierce."

"Of course," said I, "he was one of her early lovers, and remained single for her sake years after she married Sir Peter. But the young men, Essie?"

"I will show you my programme," said Esther, producing it, very crumpled, from her pocket. "The young men were very pleasant, and I could have danced every dance many times over. The girls, too, were very pretty and beautifully dressed, and there were many I thought I should like to know. The only one who was not nice was that horrid little Miss Pettigrew. Do you remember her, Hilda, that day long ago at Annagassan Races? Well, she spoke to me once when I sat near her, resting from a dance, and was by way of being very polite, but I couldn't respond very cordially. She didn't seem to know many ladies, I thought, though she had plenty of partners."

"I daresay," said I, carelessly; "but she's not worth talking about. I see a great many initials here. Which of your partners did you like the best?"

Esther blushed.

"They were all very pleasant, dear Hilda," she said. And then, with a little jerk of the voice, as if she did herself violence in speaking:

"Mr. De Lacy was there too, Hilda."

"Oh, was he?" said I. "I was just thinking that the frequent 'De L.' here stood for him. And how is he, Essie?"

"He did not look well, Hilda, though he said he was well. Those internal hurts take long to heal, and then it must be horrible for him at Angry, horrible."

"It is plucky of him to stay there when he might be with his dear old grandfather in Warwickshire."

"Yes, isn't it? I think it noble of him, Hilda."

"He asked for us all?"

"Yes, most affectionately. He thought of everyone. He asked me if I thought Aline would ever withdraw her denial of Brandon to him. She might, Hilda, don't you think? It would be only kindness, seeing how alone he is and young, and ill fitted for what he has to endure."

"If he were our friend, Essie, he might have harder things to bear."

"What do you mean, Hilda?"

"You cannot guess?"

Suddenly Esther turned from me and hid her face in her hands. Her shoulders began to heave up and down, and a heavy sob broke from her. It struck me suddenly that this was the weeping of one used to a burden. The

tears flowed very fast as if they had been held back for a long time, and the sobbing went on with a quiet patience that brought a pain into my own heart.

"Poor Essie!" I said, "poor Essie!" and then I put my arms about her, and let her cry her fill.

"Oh, Hilda!" she whispered at last, "he looks so ill, and I cannot bear it. They will kill him, and I shall die too."

"When did it all begin, Esther?" I whispered back again.

"The first minute we saw each other, I think. But he went away without speaking, and yet he knew I loved him, and I knew he loved me. It is love for ever with both of us, Hilda."

"You haven't been meeting him, Esther?"

"Oh, no! you don't think I could? Not secretly, and within Brandon walls. If I met him I should tell everybody. But I'll tell you how it happened. You know your hiding-place in the abbey, of which you gave me the secret?"

"My tree? Yes."

"Well, I used to go there after he left, where I could be quiet and think. You were keeping the house at the time with a cold, so I was undisturbed. And the second day I was there I saw him riding by, looking so sad and delicate. He did not seem fit to be on horseback at all. And while I was looking down at him, he looked up and saw me. I didn't show myself, indeed, Hilda. It was as if he felt I was there, and obliged me to show my

face. I was wearing one of those pale monthly roses in my frock, and he halted under the tree and looked up at me, and called out, 'Give me your rose, Esther, and I shall understand'. And I threw the rose to him. You should have seen his face as he caught it. But I wouldn't stay to speak. I swung myself down from the tree, and ran away as fast as ever I could. After that it came by degrees that I used to be there most days to see him pass by, and every day I gave him a rose, and if it happened that I could not be there at that hour, I used to go early and leave the rose in the abbey window where he could find it."

"And was the rose all? Did you never speak?"

"He used to say a word or two sometimes, but I would not wait to listen. I knew he loved me, and just then Aline was so troubled about Pierce, and I could not bear to deceive her. I would have felt the deception a stain on our love."

"And it went no further than the rose?"

"No. Was it very bad, Hilda?"

"It was superhumanly good, Esther. But I am glad you were so good. However, you talked last night?"

"He said a great many things which I had always known," she said, her cheeks all one soft fire.

"Well, Essie dear," I said consolingly,—during her recital the tears had dried themselves away on her hot cheeks,—“we must only hope for the best. Of course it's a pity you should have selected the grandson of the hereditary enemy to fall in love with, but, as a matter of

Christianity, there's no reason why the feud shouldn't lie with Sir Rupert in his grave. He made it, and I don't see why it shouldn't end with him. And then it would be a pretty bit of poetical justice if his heir should marry one of the family he has impoverished."

"Marry!" cried Esther; "I had not thought about marrying!"

"I don't suppose you had," said I, "but those things generally end that way. All the same, I daresay it's as well you shouldn't think about it just yet, for I've no doubt that the fact that Sir Rupert is still alive will indefinitely postpone it."

"I should be satisfied," said Esther, with one of her enraptured looks, "just to know that he loved me, and that things were well with him. I think I should be happy so, if I were never to see him."

I kissed her for answer. Dear Esther, she was always one to give up all and never count the cost.

"Now, bathe your face and come down," I said, after a few minutes, "or Lady O'Brien will think I have kidnapped you. By the way, you will tell Aline that you met young De Lacy at the ball?"

"I suppose so," said Esther; "or will you, Hilda? I should be afraid of betraying myself."

"I daresay your godmother will save us the trouble," I suggested.

And, sure enough, when we went downstairs the first name we heard from Lady O'Brien's lips was De Lacy. Fortunately the room was full of dusk and firelight by

this time, so that the mantling colour which I felt sure Esther wore was invisible.

"I'm inclined to agree with you," Pierce was saying as we went in. "If I'd been here I should hardly have backed up Aline in shutting the door against the lad. He had right on his side when he refused to be made an enemy on his grandfather's account."

"He's a throw-back, as his father was before him," said Lady O'Brien, "or how does a De Lacy come by those gentle eyes and delicate ways? It makes him less of a match for old Rupert."

"Still, he has plenty of courage," said Aline, "or he wouldn't be shut up in Angry with those two wicked old men."

"Indeed, then, 'tis no place for him," asserted Lady O'Brien. "And more betoken, he is going to have the run of my drawing-room, I can tell you."

I saw a quick look of alarm in Aline's face. If that speech had been uttered before she had consented to Esther's going, her consent would have been harder to extract. But now it was too late to withdraw, and so poor Aline, with a melancholy visage, said good-bye to the sister whom we should see constantly, but who had nevertheless gone out of our house and our home, for ever in all probability. Such partings, even in the happiest circumstances, are sad things.

That night, as I was going to bed, Aline came in and kissed me with unusual fervour.

"Ah, little Hilda," she said, "we are beginning to

dwindle!" and I knew she had it in her mind of who would be the next to go.

"But it is good for Esther," I said, though my own heart was full of tears.

"Yes, Lady O'Brien has already provided for her. Sir Peter's money returns to his family, but she has a comfortable sum to live on in her own right. So that two of the children are now safe out of the clutches of poverty—Freda and Esther. We who are left ought not to repine."

If there was anything else at her heart she did not speak of it to me that night.





CHAPTER XV.

PIERCE GOES ON A JOURNEY.

THAT winter was a very quiet and a very sad one. As the days passed we felt the wings of death brooding closer over the house. Little by little Pierce had given up the ways of one who was to live, had given up his bath-chair which was Lady O'Brien's present, and the sofa in Aline's room, and the coming downstairs. We knew now that he would come down no more till he was carried down, and we dreaded the spring that would bring further weakness to our beloved invalid, and the summer that would take him from us.

He liked to get up about noon and lie on a sofa drawn near the fire and have us to talk to him, and as the days turned towards the spring he lay by the window where he could see the cloudiness coming on the bare boughs and Brandon turning bronze and pink in the fresh cold air.

What his room became in those days I never could tell. Whatever had befallen our Pierce out in the world, and he carried the secret with him to the grave, he had saved his soul triumphantly out of it. To see him there

dying in the flush of his youth, so resigned, so gentle, so merry even, clutched at our hearts. He prayed incessantly when he was alone or quiet, and in those latter days he came to have visibly the light of God's countenance upon his face. His room was like the cell of a saint to which we went for help, and comfort, and refreshment. Once when Aline and I came out together she suddenly caught at me and began to sob silently against my shoulder, yet in the midst of her anguish she whispered to me:

"Oh, Hilda, I wouldn't keep him if I could! I can see that he is ripe for heaven. And yet, and yet, it breaks my heart to see him so glad to go."

All this put Esther's love affairs greatly out of my mind. Daily she and her godmother drove over to see how Pierce was, and to sit with him a little. When his voice had sunk almost to a whisper he still tried to keep up the old merry banter with the friend who had been so good to him and us, and I have seen the dear old woman respond bravely while the big tears stood in her eyes.

Once when she had had to go away to conceal her emotion, she said to Aline:

"'Tis not tears of sorrow, my dear, I'm giving him, 'tis only that it dazzles my sinful old eyes to have sight of one of God's saints passing. Hush, now, my dear, don't be grudging him his joy. 'Tis for you who love him to be glad for him."

"But he is so young to die," said poor Aline, "and he and I were to have been always together."

"Ah, my child," responded the old woman with a sudden intuition, "you might have lost him more cruelly! Don't you see that he's had some trouble, young as he is, that has just ended his life for him. And kinder so. He wasn't one to grow hard and wicked, nor yet was he one to live carrying a dead heart about with him the rest of his days. Indeed, indeed, God gave him the better part."

"Oh," said Aline, "you think he has had a great sorrow?"

"I am sure of it, child, but maybe it was just through that same sorrow that God gathered him."

"Yet let him keep the rest
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast"—

I said softly from my corner, where they had not seemed to notice me.

Lady O'Brien turned round sharply.

"That's it, Hilda, that's it. Your poetry has said it a thousand times better than I ever could."

Esther, during these visits, would sit on the floor by Pierce, and now and again would lay her cheek to his hand.

"I wish I could tell him, Hilda," she said once, "but I can't trouble him now. If all were well with us it would be another matter, but I must not bring trouble near him. And yet his touch comforts me."

Esther's fears now were mainly concerned with her lover's health. Her experience of Pierce had taught her to look for the signs and tokens of illness, and sometimes she came to me in a paroxysm of terror because she thought Harry De Lacy looked frailer than when last she had seen him, or because she had heard him cough, or noted the transparency of his hand against the light.

He was not an over-frequent visitor at Annagower, not more so than many other gentlemen, and as yet the understanding between him and Esther was not a formal one. She could not, she said, in these sad days, trouble anyone about her affairs, and it was better that he should be very patient and not come too often, nor try to force things to a conclusion.

"If I had him to nurse and feed up and take care of, everything would be well," she used to say; "but now I fear that he will stay at Angry, only to die there. I wish he would go back to Warwickshire and grow strong. I could bear absence, silence, anything, if I had not this dreadful fear."

"Except separation," I suggested.

"Only death could bring that about," said Esther solemnly. "If he were to leave me, and I were to hear nothing from him, I should know that he was dead."

The trouble that was brooding over us seemed to bind us Brandons more closely. The poor boys were always hanging about with wistful faces that spring, wanting to do something to help if they could. They used to come into Pierce's room and sit down with a great parade of

not creaking or making noise, and soften their rough young voices to a hoarse whisper as they addressed him. I have seen the old humour flash into Pierce's sunken eyes as he looked at them, humour oddly blent with immense tenderness. Then out of sheer kindness he would send them off fishing or shooting, with an expressed desire for a trout or a quail, for which, when they arrived, he had no appetite.

The twins, too, proved themselves little hearts of gold. They would bring in their treasures from garden and woodland to show to Pierce—early primroses, or a group of tall daffodils, or a mass of wild hyacinths;—such things brought to him by his shy little sisters seemed to give him great pleasure. He would stroke their brown heads and tell them to be very good to Aline, and then would watch them fondly while they sat before the fire, their two heads bent over one book, till he fell asleep.

At Easter Freda came for a week. We thought she would have waited for the end, though that was not a thought we put into words for each other, but it seemed strange that she could not stay by Pierce as long as we kept his precious body on the earth.

Yet she seemed to care as much as any of us, and hardly left Pierce's room during that week.

"I suppose it is the child," Aline said to me as if she would excuse her. "We can't be expected to understand how a mother's heart drags her back to where her child is."

"Yet I should think," I said, "that she might have

trusted him to Mrs. Vincent for a while, so that she might stay with Pierce while . . . while—”

And here I broke off with a sob and went out of the room.

But I was present when Freda and Pierce said good-bye, at least for the beginning of their parting.

Freda had come in with her hat on, and looked very pale, I noticed, but tearless. She knelt down by Pierce, and I heard her say:

“I have to go, darling. You know, darling, that I must go, though it is breaking my heart to leave you now.”

“I know, Freda,” he said, “and it has been good to have had you this week. Good-bye, my dearest! When I am gone you will have two instead of one in that distant country.”

I saw Freda wring her hands. Then I got up and went out of the room. I thought it best to leave them together.

So Freda went away, and though we said nothing, Aline, I am sure, felt a little chill at her heart against her that she could go. Yet, having seen the trouble in her face, I could not judge her. There must be reasons that we did not know.

But when Lady O'Brien broached the subject I did not know how to answer her.

“I don't want, my dear,” she said, “to be prying and impertinent, and I can't think badly of a Brandon; yet, how is it that your sister couldn't stay to see the last of

that dear saint, and to be a comfort to poor Aline when the time comes?"

"I do not know, Lady O'Brien," I answered truthfully.

"And why didn't you ask her, my dear?"

Yes; the old lady was right. Why hadn't we asked Freda to solve for us the mystery that had somehow grown up about her. It would have been the simplest thing to do, and might have saved us the wondering pain that was in our hearts when we thought of her.

"It is what we ought to have done, Lady O'Brien," I assented. "But one thing I can assure you of, Freda is not hard-hearted. If you had seen her face as I did, when she said good-bye to Pierce, you would be as sure as I am."

I have always heard that consumptives take it hard to die. Looking back now on those days, I thank God that it was not so with Pierce. He seemed to have foreseen every step of the way, and to be prepared to endure it all joyfully—the night-sweats, and the fevers, and the exhaustion, and the terrible, terrible difficulty of breathing. He never complained, and his only distress seemed to be that it caused pain to those he loved so dearly.

The month of May turned round in a glorious succession of scented days and silver nights. The end was very near now, and Aline was sitting up at nights with Pierce. It was a duty she would yield to no one, and even Oona forbore to press her, for we felt that she could not endure to be away from him a minute longer

than she could help, and they were to be together so short a time.

I could not sleep those nights. The moon was so brilliant, and the scent of hawthorn and lilac so ravishing, and all night the corncrake sawed incessantly in the ripening grasses. So I often kept vigil with Aline and Pierce, though they did not know it.

I used to sit on the top step of the stairs from the great hall of Brandon, round the gallery of which many doors open. One at the stair-head opened into Pierce's room, and sitting there huddled in my dressing-gown I could hear his laboured breathing, and sometimes the soft murmur of Aline's voice as she spoke to him, or her quiet movements as she went to and fro in the room.

I sat there sometimes till well into the dawn. Over my head the great hall window held the east, and through its colours the sunrise came magnificently.

I was sitting there one night with my head in my hands, and the moonlight was casting black lozenges on to the floor. Everything was quiet in Pierce's room, save only the struggle for breath that went on incessantly. Suddenly there rang through the night outside the cry of a woman. It began thin as an *Æolian* harp, and swelled to a full chord of passionate lamentation. It came from without, but it seemed to ring through the old house and beat against the rafters of the high roof overhead.

I sprang to my feet terrified, and with a wild impulse to fly anywhere for human companionship, but my

fear of disturbing the dying and the mourner kept me still.

Again the wild cry rang out, more piercing and heart-broken. I looked at the sick-room door, expecting Aline to appear, but all was quiet.

The third time it rang, and now it was close by me, close against the great window. I lifted my eyes in fascinated terror, and for a moment the moonlight was blotted out. Something like the wings of a great bird, or the trailing veil of a woman, passed slowly across the panes. Then I fell, huddled up, with my head against the upper step.

When I came to myself I was lying on my own bed, and Oona was bathing my head with something sharp and aromatic. The gray dawn was filling the room like a tide.

"Oh, Oona!" I cried; "what was it? Did you hear it, the dreadful thing?"

"Whisht, my lamb! I heard her. Many's the time I've heard her these sorrowful months. But she's not dreadful, my jewel. She loves every one of ye, and 'tis because her heart's breaking for the trouble in the family that she cries like that."

"They didn't hear, Oona?" I asked, with a new fear.

"Not a sound. Master Pierce was asleep when I went in, an' Miss Aline, poor lamb, was sound off, with her head against his hand. She's wore out, sure she is. I didn't disturb her. 'Sleep, my honey,' I said, for I knew she'd need all her strength for the trouble that's so close at

hand. Why, when I found you in your white gown I thought 'twas you was the banshee, Miss Hilda, darling. There, never be afraid of her. Sure she loves every hair of your heads."

In the afternoon of the next day Pierce died. All through the day he had been dozing quietly, with his hand lying in Aline's, while incessantly she dried his face with a handkerchief. We were all in the room, including Esther, who had been sent for, all huddled about miserably, some of us weeping, and the boys manfully trying to keep the tears out of sight.

Now and again Oona would steal into the room, and bring one or another away for food. It was terrible waiting there for the end, with nothing to do but wait. At every least sound Pierce would start, and open his eyes, and then would sink off again into a stupor.

We were troubled about Aline, who had eaten nothing. After all it was Hugh who persuaded her. He brought some nourishing jelly to her, and when she shook her head, he was not to be put off like the rest of us.

"Pierce said last night that he gave you to me to take care of," said the poor boy huskily, and as he said it Pierce opened his eyes and smiled at him.

"You are the head of the house," he said slowly. "You will be what I failed in being."

Then he closed his eyes, and Aline allowed herself to be fed by spoonfuls with the jelly.

About three o'clock in the afternoon Pierce seemed to rally. He looked round at us all with calm seeing eyes,

and seemed to know us quite well. His lethargy had passed away for the moment. He turned to Aline, and looked at her with great tenderness.

"I wish you would find out Desmond," he said, "and let him know that I loved him at the last, and that I knew he was right, and thanked him."

"I will do it, Pierce," said Aline.

"I wanted to say more," he said, "but I am too tired to think."

Then he smiled on us all round, and fell asleep smiling. We thought he would have died in that sleep, but he did not. The clock in the stable-yard had just struck five when he opened his eyes, full and wide, and gazed upwards.

"*Remember me*", he cried, "*when Thou art come into Thy kingdom.*"

And then a film seemed to settle on the brightness, and the light slowly faded out.





CHAPTER XVI.

HONEY AMONG THE ROSES.

THAT was the loneliest summer that ever I remember. Soon after Pierce had left us, Lady O'Brien carried Aline and Esther off to Kilkee. Aline bore her sorrow bravely, with more hope and faith than we had dared to expect; but if you have been building all your thoughts and cares and wishes and anxieties about one human being for nearly all your years, and then you are bereft, the empty place is terrible. Even our Lord Himself endured desolation, and He does not spare it to His creatures though He walk with them through the shadows.

There had been some talk of my going after a time, when Aline should return. Lady O'Brien had taken her cottage till the end of September. But I begged her to keep Aline and let me stay at home,—I knew Aline's mind would be at rest while I was in charge,—and I had my wish.

But, oh, the unutterable loneliness of it! It was a beautiful summer, with long, long days of haze and heat, and evenings that trailed themselves out, I thought, un-

duly long. There was no excuse for firelit and lamplit evenings. By the time the moon had come out in the green sky, and the last wood-dove had gone to bed, it was time for me to follow.

I have always associated the call of the wood-quest, as we call it, with the loneliness of that summer. As the woods grew dark with their prime, and the love-songs of the blackbird were stilled, that lonely complaint of the dove seemed to brood over all the world. The children say it is the bird's lament for the smallness of her family.

"The robin and the wren have nine and ten,
And I have only two—oo—oo."

When I have been happy her note has sounded as though she were sweetly in love with her own melancholy, but now, how lonely it was, oh, how lonely!

The young ones were always out and about, full of the multitudinous occupations of country children in summer. I would not hamper them with my lagging steps or burden them with my melancholy, so that, except for Oona, I was almost always alone. And she was not cheerful. The death of her eldest nursling had shaken her sorely, and she had grown feebler and was usually full of forebodings and omens.

But for my writing I could not have endured the loneliness. I scribbled a bit in those long days, and burnt much of what I scribbled, but what I retained I laid away in the secret cupboard in Aline's room. The blessed thing about writing is that we must give it everything

for the time, entire absorption. If I had had to sit and sew a seam, I think my heart would have broken. I started my novel, *Love in the Valley*, some time that July, and it progressed more to my satisfaction, and with less destruction of manuscript, than anything I had hitherto attempted. I love the book, because it helped me then, more than any of its successors. People find it sad, but the sadness and loneliness of youth are of the most monotonous gray. The future has no such illuminating flashes as come out of the past.

I had always been rather starved for reading. The Brandons could never have been very bookish folk, and it is not possible to find any but very dry provender in the mouldering volumes bound in calf and gold which line the library. Why, a whole side of it is taken up by *Transactions of the Irish Parliament*, wherein many Brandons sat; and many of the later volumes are records of learned societies and such things. The little amount of literary bread to this vast deal of sack I had devoured long ago.

Well, one evening in August, when I was finding my time more than usually heavy, Oona came to me where I sat on the terrace overlooking the rose-garden, and longing for once that I could fly out into the world where the human soul need not walk in such utter loneliness. She looked quite cheerful, and I turned to her, willing to be cheered.

"Miss Hilda dear," she said, "I've a little bit of news for you. Rose Hill is open again."

"Indeed!" said I languidly. "Who has taken it?"

"A military gentleman; General Hugh MacNeill. Oh, a rare good Irish stock, though his family has lived out of the country!"

"I'm glad the pretty old place is not to go to rack and ruin like many another."

"Oh, they're putting the finest complexion at all on it! Thousands of painters and paper men in it, I hear, and the most elegant of furniture come down from Dublin. 'Twill be a sight when 'tis all done."

"I suppose he has a family," I said, more by way of being civil to Oona than anything else, for I didn't suppose the occupation of Rose Hill would affect us any more than the occupation of twenty other houses in the country.

"Sorra one. He's an ould bachelor gentleman, or a widdy man—I don't rightly know which. But it isn't about him I'm thinking, an' he's not expected this good while yet. 'Tis a visit I'm after havin' from my cousin, Mary O'Connor. She's goin' as housekeeper. I believe 'twas Lady O'Brien gave her the good word, for the General and she's ould friends. 'Tis glad I am Mary's in place again, an' two housemaids an' a boy under her. It'll be new life to her, the poor woman, to have them to drive over-an'-hither. She was always used to rulin' sarvants, an' a fine heavy hand over them she has, Miss Hilda dear. I'd like to be there the first day or two to hear the malavoguin' Mary'll give them with her tongue. They're English, more betoken."

Oona seemed as heartened up by Mary's news as Mary could be herself, and I was cheered insensibly enough to waken up to a certain interest in her tale.

"The grandest of chaney an' ould eccentricities out o' the Aist. Mary says there is haythen gods an' goddesses that hasn't a screed on them, and 'ud be downright on-decent, only they're brute bastes, an' silver trays as big as a cart-wheel, an' little houses—piggodys, Mary says they're named—of ivory, an' big ould elephant tusks. There's no end to the grandeur. An' Mary's duty to you, Miss Hilda, an' if you'd bring over the little ladies, an' Master Hugh and Master Donald, she thinks they'd like to see the ingenuities. An' proud she'd be if you'd take a cup of tea afterwards."

"It would be very pleasant, Oona," I said, "if you are sure there would be no danger of intrusion."

"Sure isn't Mary housekeeper, an' the master not expected this month yet? Let alone that him an' Lady O'Brien's ould cronies, an' I expect yez'll be in an' out with him, like a dog at a fair, all the time as soon as he gets settled."

"Then we shall certainly go, Oona," I said. "The twins would love it, I know, and so would the boys."

"Oh, Miss Hilda dear!" cried Oona, her voice changing to one of tragic supplication, "all I ask you is to keep them darlin' boys from the ould swoords an' pistols an' trumperies that Mary says has come down by the cart-load. Sure 'tis not in Nature if they go meddlin' with them that they won't kill aich other or thimselves. Let

alone that some o' them is maybe poisoned, as Mary says, an' a scratch o' one 'ud let the life out of a rig'mint."

"They'll be sensible, Oona, an' not meddle with them."

"Indeed, then, an' if they are they won't be like any boy-flesh I ever heard tell of. 'Tis as natural for boys to kill thimselves as for the bird to fly. There! an' you can't have 'em different. The Lord made them so."

The next day the party of us went over to Rose Hill accompanied by Oona, who could not refrain from seeing the "ingenuities" as well as ourselves, though she put it on the score of seeing that the boys and the twins didn't get into mischief.

Rose Hill is built on the side of a little ravine, down which it looks to the plain and the distant sea. You ascend to it through a tiny wood, and you look down from the winding pathway upon a little brown trout-stream in the valley below. The house is fancifully built with balconies and green outside shutters, and stands but two stories, to the second of which you ascend by the hall-door steps. But it stretches away at the back to a considerable size.

The house had long been shut up, and many a time as children we had peered in at the unshuttered windows to rooms once gay with gilding and white wood paneling, with marble mantel-pieces that had coloured wreaths let in, and shutters with looking-glass in the panels. The house seemed built for lightness and brightness, and was said indeed to have been designed for a bride. But

the bride died almost before the waning of the honeymoon, and the disconsolate bridegroom shut up the place, and let it go to ruin.

The little lawn in front was planted thickly with rose-trees, from which I suppose the place derived its name. Many of them had gone half-wild, and every summer these flung out the most exquisite rosy veil of blossoms, more beautiful, with the pale-green leaves, than any gardener ever fostered. For years we had gathered those roses, and waded in the grass, knee-deep, in the garden, to find the cherries and apples and pears and plums in their season, which would otherwise have gone to feed the birds.

As we came up to the door we saw the changes that were taking place. The long grass was mown and lying in swathes, and a grumpy-looking old man was shearing the rose-trees, now fortunately done blooming.

The house-door stood open, and the hall was full of painters' ladders and paint-pots and such things, while already the front of the house had been brilliantly whitened and the shutters re-painted.

Oona's cousin came bustling out to meet us, her comfortable face wreathed in smiles. She was dressed very neatly in black, but I could imagine that her frilled white cap, and the little shawl round her shoulders, might excite the derision of the English servants. However, as Oona explained, Mary was subject to the ear-ache this good many years back, and couldn't bring herself to return to the cocked-up bit of a thing which she had

worn with dignity on her dark hair in her old house-keeping days.

The library was in comparative order. Like all the rooms in the house, it was light, and the bookshelves had been painted white, which I thought very gay. The floor had been covered with a cool green-and-white matting, and the green blinds were drawn down to temper the brightness of the room. It was a real summer room as I saw it first, and the effect was increased by the open French window, which led on to a flight of steps going down to the garden.

Tea was set out on a table, with strawberries in their own green leaves, and honey, fresh from the hive, with many other good things; but it was not the eatables that made me draw a long breath of rapture. It was what seemed to me the endless number of books—books of every kind I saw at a glance, grave and gay, ancient and modern, poetry, novels, biography, art, in all manner of bindings, from purple morocco to the humble paper yellowback.

They were piled high on the floor, and in boxes, some opened, some still unopened. Rows of the books were hastily set on the shelves, to be out of the way, I felt sure, for they were higgledy-piggledy, upside down, long and short, and most incongruous neighbours.

You, good people, who have never wanted for books, can have no idea of what the sight meant to me, to whom a solitary book newly come my way, represented hours of delight. I simply stood and sniffed at the books,

inhaling the smell of them with rapture. For the moment I did not ask to touch; to gape at them was enough; and twice Mrs. O'Connor asked me to take my seat at the tea-table unheard.

"There!" said Oona, "she never saw so many books before in her life. Come away, Miss Hilda dear, and have your tea; but sure I never saw the day, no matter how young you were, that you wouldn't rather have an ould *romaus*h of a book than your good food."

"Is that the way with her?" said Mary O'Connor, as I came reluctantly to the table. "Whethen she'll have to be findin' her way to Rose Hill every day that's in it, if she's to get through half the books. I hear there's thousands more to come down."

"That won't give her much trouble," said Oona proudly. "Why, before she was three she could read me the whole news was on the papers."

"You don't say so!" cried her cousin, with hands flung out in admiration.

"I wouldn't blame you for doubtin' my word, for Dr. Whittaker, Lord rest him, did the same. He was in vaccinatin' Master Donald, and Miss Hilda sat on her little creepy-stool readin' the paper to her dolls. 'Tis gibberish,' says he. 'Askin' your pardon, sir, for contradictin' you, 'tis sense,' says I. 'Come over here, my little girl,' says he, 'an' tell me,' he says, 'if the Rooshians is smashin' the Turks, or the Turks knockin' smoke out o' the Rooshians.' Well, of course, the innocent child took him sariously, an' so she came an' perched on his

knee, an' began to read for him—though, of course, some of the words was too big for her little mouth. 'Oh, by this and that,' says he, 'this licks creation! 'Tis a progedy she's goin' to be, or else,' says he, 'she'll grow up without any sinse at all in her brain-pan.'"

If Mary O'Connor hadn't heard this tale a thousand times the young Brandons had, and the boys at this stage looked up indignantly from their strawberries and cream, to tell Oona they were rather tired of it.

"'Deed, then," she said, very angry with them, "if a bit o' the same love of the book had been passed on, 'twould have been a good thing; but Master Hugh there said he'd rather ait his jography than learn it, and Master Donald, it's well known through the barony, turned his Ailments of Euclid into kite-tails."

At this stage, seeing things looked a bit stormy, I interposed with an inquiry about the "ingenuities", and the attention of the boys was distracted.

After tea we roamed about the house and gardens at our will. The rooms were still full of big packing-cases and swathed articles which made progress difficult.

"General MacNeill seems likely to settle here, Mary," I said, looking round at the assemblage of furniture.

"I'm told he says he doesn't want to stir out of it till he dies. I hear he's burnt black, poor man, with the Ingy sun, an' his temper not what it ought to be by raison of the annoyance of them Red Injins he's been commandin'. I wouldn't be surprised now if he's come here to get his mind quiet an' his temper settled before

he laves this world for a better. Ireland's an elegant quiet place for makin' your sowl."

I smiled, remembering that Lady O'Brien had said something of the same kind.

After we had viewed all the curiosities, and enjoyed ourselves immensely, I sat down quietly in the library to wait till the boys and the twins were satiated with the gardens, and while the two old cronies were having their gossip in the housekeeper's room.

The library was deliciously quiet, and I wandered about from one heap to another, picking off a book and looking into it, and then drawn by the embarrassment of my riches to another one. I felt as if I should be a long time in that library before I could settle down to read. I should have to look into every single book first. There were delightful little ladders by which to reach the upper shelves. I looked at the chaos of books up there.

"Ah," said I, "if I had a long, long day, I should ask for nothing better than to arrange those books!"

A sudden flash of inspiration came to me.

"Hilda Brandon," said I, "you were born to be a librarian!"

And indeed it seemed to me at the moment as though the earth could hold no fairer plot of peace than this cool place, with the green garden below, and the atmosphere inside cool green like the woods, and all those books waiting to be handled and dusted and loved.

Presently the twins came up the garden steps, and

said they should like to go home, by which I guessed that their fruit-eating capacity had come to an end.

"I hope you won't be horribly upset to-morrow, little girls," said I; but they assured me that they could have eaten a great deal more if they really wanted to, only they feared that the boys would make themselves ill with the green apples they were eating after all the ripe fruit.

However, a boy's digestion is a wonderful thing, and the interest those boys, and the twins as well, showed in their supper on the way home, fairly amazed me.

Before we left, Mary O'Connor gave me a very urgent invitation to come and read all the books I liked, and Oona seconded her.

"'Twill do you a world of good, Miss Hilda," she said, "an' keep you from mopin' about by yourself, so that the sight of you keeps my own heart sore."

"But what would General MacNeill say?" I said hesitating, for I wanted very badly to come.

"What would he say!" exclaimed Mary indignantly; "only that he was a proud man to have a clever young lady like yourself enjoyin' his ould books. But anyhow he's not due this month yet, and you can come in by the garden door without even knockin', but just come an' go as you like. There's no one will make or meddle with you, an' sure when the master comes, an' ould Lady O'Brien fetches him over to see you, you can just spake up an' ask him if you mayn't have the run of the place."

"Very well, Mary," said I, "I'll come."

Indeed the books seemed such a paradise to me that I did not stop overlong to examine my scruples about invading General MacNeill's domain. After all, unless he was a perfect curmudgeon, he could not object, and then his friendship with Esther's godmother seemed to make him a kind of friend of ours too.

Yes, on the whole, I thought I might venture to accept Mary's invitation, and indeed the thought of it sent me to bed that night with more cheerfulness in my heart than I had known since Pierce died.





CHAPTER XVII.

THE MASTER OF ROSE HILL.

THE following day, after I had presided at lunch, I set out with great joy for Rose Hill, and spent a long afternoon among the books, and though I had said, to quiet my scruples, that I would not go too often, yet there did not seem a day of the days following that I could bear to keep away. It changed all the face of my daily life for me, to look forward to those quiet hours. As Mary O'Connor had said, no one disturbed me. I went in by the garden and up the rose-wreathed steps, and found the door standing invitingly open every day. Then at four Mary would send me in a little tea-tray, which I was usually glad enough to see after my climb up the hilly road, and my rest among the books; and then after tea I would read again till it was time to go home.

But after a good many days spent in sipping the honey of the books, an eagerness came on me to arrange them in their shelves, so I asked the pretty little English maid who brought my tea if she could fetch me a duster and a feather-brush.

"Lawks, miss," she cried, "wotever for?"

"I'm going to arrange the books, Jane," said I. I never could bring myself to call her "Jenkins", by which name she had been known in her other situations, she told me, and Mary O'Connor was in sympathy with me on this one point, though she could seldom be accused of over-consideration to her subordinates.

"If I was in a place," Mary said, "and they called me 'O'Connor', I'd ask them if it was a dog they were spakin' to, and take my box and walk."

Jane was so perturbed by my desire for activity that she carried my request to Mary herself, who came hurrying in.

"That omadhaun of a girl's after comin' to me with a story about your wantin' a feather-whisk and a duster, Miss Hilda. I told her no Brandon could want the like. They haven't got their hearin' right, them cratures; often an' often when I do send them to turn out the upper bedrooms, 'tis in the drawin'-room, where the painter-men are workin', I'll find them. And then they'll say they didn't understand me rightly. 'The shoe's on the wrong foot, my girl,' says I. 'If it was myself didn't understand your outlandish up-and-down curlykews of a way of spakin', there'd be nothin' wonderful in it'."

"But I do really want the feather-brush and duster, and a big apron, if you will lend them to me, Mary. I do so want to get those books in order."

"You'll be fallin' down an' breakin' your neck," said Mary doubtfully.

"I'll do nothing of the kind," I assured her. "I'll take my time about it, and set up all the books by degrees. I shall love to do it, and when the General comes home he'll think you and your handmaidens have been so clever, Mary."

"You won't tire yourself, honey?"

"I'll leave off the minute I'm tired. I'll promise you that, Mary," cried I, all eagerness to begin.

So Mary brought me a big serviceable apron, and manufactured me a mob-cap out of a piece of muslin, to keep my hair from the dust, and, so protected, I began my labours. Mary had the remaining packing-cases opened for me, so that I had all the books under my hand. I said to myself that I was giving General MacNeill a *quid pro quo* for reading his books, but I really set out to arrange them for the sheer pleasure the task gave me. It was slow work, but it was quite delightful when one had got a comely shelf-full of them together, to sit down and survey one's handiwork, and enjoy a well-earned rest and recreation.

But between finding out the books and sorting them, and occasionally altering the whole arrangement of them, things got on slowly. It was nearing the month's end, and yet only one side of the library had been done. I was beginning to grow hopeless about finishing the job before the General should arrive and put a stop to my labours, but as yet there was no word of his coming. I dreaded that coming, which should shut me out of the library, and send me back to my former loneliness.

I had gone over one afternoon, and entered by the garden as usual, and, having donned my cap and apron, I was working away furiously at an upper shelf. Suddenly I heard a cough behind me, and it startled me so much that it was a mercy I didn't fall. But my lameness has taught me caution, so I turned round very carefully and sat down on the top step of the ladder to survey the intruder.

It was an old gentleman with a face the colour of mahogany and a bristling white moustache—General MacNeill, of course. Neither of us said anything for a minute, and then he coughed again, a short sharp cough, exactly like a little bark. At the sound, Paudeen, who had been eyeing him watchfully from the rug at the door on which he lay every afternoon, responded with a bark which might have been an echo.

The old fellow looked towards Paudeen irately, as if he suspected mockery, then back at me.

"What is your name, my girl, and what are you doing with those books?" he snapped.

"My name is Brandon, sir," said I meekly, "and I'm putting the books in order."

"H'm! You'll be a strange kind of housemaid if you're able to do that. Who put you to do it?—Mrs. O'Connor? Hey? What kind of a fool is the woman to put you to such work?"

"If you please, sir," said I, "she didn't. I put myself to it."

"Hoity-toity! Is this how discipline is kept? How

do you suppose that plan would work in the army, young woman, if every man put himself to whatever work he liked?"

"Badly," said I.

"Badly is the word," he said emphatically. "And now if you'll please to step off that ladder I'll see what kind of hay you've been making of my library."

I came down meekly and stood watching him, while he went up in my place and began examining my shelves.

"H'm, h'm!" he said to himself. "Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides,—not so bad, by Jove! It must have been a chance shot her sticking them side by side. H'm, h'm,—Horace, Catullus, Pindar,—couldn't have done it better myself."

He came down with great agility and faced me, frowning.

"Now, look here," he said gruffly, "are you a classical housemaid?"

His tone was so aggressive that Paudeen got up from his rug and came towards us, growling suspiciously.

"Be quiet, Paudeen," said I; and then answering my interlocutor: "No, sir, I'm not classical; I've only gone by what I've heard."

"Where did my housekeeper pick you up? Do you belong to the neighbourhood?"

"Yes, sir."

I was beginning to wonder with some alarm how I should own up to this very irascible-looking old gentle-



"NOW, LOOK HERE," HE SAID GRUFFLY, "ARE YOU
A CLASSICAL HOUSEMAID?"

man, when Mary O'Connor came in. She held up her hands, standing behind him, in amazement. Then she came forward.

"Shall I bring your tea here, sir?" she asked, evidently under the impression that there was nothing to be explained. "I see Miss Hilda's been tellin' you that I allowed her to read among your books. I told her, sir, that I knew you'd make her kindly welcome."

"Miss what?" he thundered, so suddenly, that Mary jumped.

"Why, Miss Hilda Brandon, sir," she answered stiffly. "Miss Brandon, of Brandon. Miss Esther lives with Lady O'Brien,—an' a kinder an' sweeter young lady than Miss Hilda— There,—she's give herself no end of trouble over them books."

The old fellow whisked off his skull-cap and made me a somewhat chilly bow.

"You've been laughing at me, young lady," he said.

"Oh no, indeed, General MacNeill!" I said; "it was you that took me for a housemaid, and I was just making up my mind to undeceive you."

"But you called me *sir*."

"Only homage from a young woman to a famous soldier," said I cheerfully.

"Very well," he said, his grimness relaxing. "Punishment—you'll have to pour out my tea, and afterwards explain to me what in thunder set you to doing my servants' work."

"You said before that no servant could do it."

"You are right. Well, my librarian's work, if I had such a functionary?"

"Love of it, General."

"And you'll give it up now?"

"I suppose so," said I regretfully.

"I don't see why. If you loved it before, you love it now, and I sha'n't interfere with you. A battered old hulk like me in the house needn't make much difference. There's plenty for me to do getting other things into order without my hindering you. You'll come, hey?"

"Yes, I think I shall," said I.

"That's right. And now pour out the tea."

I grew quite to like General MacNeill that very first day, he was so kind and gentle in looking after my wants, and then he took my little Paudeen on his knee and fed him with dainty little bits, so that I began to suspect an unusually kind heart under the gruff exterior.

"And so you are great friends with my old flame, Molly O'Brien?" he said.

"Molly O'Brien!" repeated I, wondering.

"Lady O'Brien, then, if it pleases you better. Of course I forget she's an old woman, and the pretty name sounds odd to a young creature like you. All the same, Molly was a pretty girl as I remember her, and the soft name just suited her—a pretty, pretty girl."

"So I've often heard her say."

"I've no doubt you have," he answered with twinkling eyes. "And how is my old friend keeping? I haven't seen her for some years."

"Very well, indeed, General. And she's a very pretty old woman, you know."

"Aye, I suppose she is. Molly'll be in her grave before she gives up her claims to be a belle."

"And very witty and sharp and kind and good," I added—"sharp-sweet, like a wholesome fruit."

"Oh, the very old Molly!" he chuckled. "You've just hit it off, young lady. Well, Molly and I were young together, and both handsome, though you'll laugh in your sleeve at my saying so," bending a somewhat fierce gaze upon me; "and here we are now, two lonely old hulks cast high and dry, side by side, to moulder to our last end. Ah! I remember Molly fresh as a rose in the dew. She should have had a girl of her own to be as pretty as she was!"

"She has my sister Esther, General, living with her now. Esther is her god-daughter, and she's as pretty as a picture—not the least bit in the world like me," I added hastily.

"Oh, indeed! I'm glad Molly's got a young girl to live with her. And your sister's very pretty, and not the least bit in the world like you. Well, well, we can't all be pretty," he said, with a humorous glint in his eyes, which, now I noticed, were quite startlingly blue for the eyes of an old man.

"The Brandons are all handsome and strong except me," said I.

"And you're good, I suppose?"

"No, but I'm supposed to have the brains," said I.

"And which would you rather have, brains or beauty?" he asked, with great gravity.

"Beauty," said I, "of course. But brains are a great comfort too."

"Now, I'm glad to hear you say that," he said. "I'd have distrusted you if you'd said you'd rather have brains. But how do you use them? Are you cramming that little head of yours with a lot of knowledge that'll never be any use to you—examinations, degrees, all that sort of thing?"

"If I were I should be almost afraid to tell you," said I, "while you frown at me like that."

"Never mind my frowns," said he. "They mean nothing. My bark's worse than my bite. See, your little dog has found that out!"

I looked at Paudeen, who was sitting with a confiding paw in one of the General's palms.

"Paudeen's a very wise dog," said I; "but I don't think it takes much wisdom to discover that."

"You saw it with half an eye, hey?" he said, frowning more fiercely than ever. "So you don't think I'm an ogre that'll eat you up. Well, I'm glad, as you're going to arrange my books for me. Still, some that should have known better took me at my angry word and went away from me. What would you think, young lady, of one who had known me all his life, and yet knew no better than to go when I said 'Go, and let me see your face no more'?"

"If it was a 'he'," said I, "that makes it difficult. If

it were a 'she', I should say she was a dunderhead. But in a matter between two men, there come in questions of pride and dignity on which I am not able to speak. I don't know enough about it."

"Well, well, we won't talk about it now. I am glad Molly O'Brien has your sister, though. And now tell me about yourself. You have other sisters? Why, I remember your grandmother, my dear. You favour her rather."

"Not a bit," said I, with some scorn. "Aline is like her, I believe, but more like grandpapa."

"Oh, Aline is another sister, I suppose?"

"Yes," said I, "our eldest, dear sister, who has mothered all of us."

And then I found myself telling him everything about ourselves, as if I had known him for years. I told him even about dear Pierce, at least till the sobs came up in my throat, and I was obliged to walk away from the table, and keep silence for a few minutes to recover my composure. When I came back to the table I found the General sitting as straight as a ramrod, and stroking Paudeen with great gravity, and so we passed on to less trying topics.

"But you didn't tell me," he said, "how you propose to use those brains of yours. Brains are given to be used, young lady."

"Oh, not in passing exams.!" said I. "I am not clever enough for that, I suppose. I am trying to write," I said, looking down at my hands, for I am shy of betraying my literary aspirations.

"Write!" he echoed. "What kind of writing?"

"Oh, novels, poems, plays," I answered.

"Well, well. So you would be an authoress? Have you published anything?"

"Nothing yet."

"Ever tried?"

"Not yet: I've burned reams."

"Ah! not easily satisfied. That's the right way to do good work. Well, the pen has a mission too, young lady. You won't forget that? You won't strive only after worldly honour and success? You won't forget the Giver of the gift?"

I was not long in finding out that General MacNeill, like many military and naval men, was very strongly and simply religious in his character, and his religion entered into all his life, even to the extent of holding his naturally fiery temper greatly in check. Though, as he told me afterwards, the struggle between the flesh and the spirit was an ever-continuing one. I could not have imagined him without his peppery temper, and I have often thought that I could not be so fond of him if he had quite succeeded in driving out the old Adam. Still, he was one of those essentially manly men who are always soft and gentle towards women, so that his greatest irascibility towards myself had a touch of tenderness in it which took out all the sting. Yet I could imagine that with a man the dear old man might have been trying. He was dictatorial, when the flesh rather than the spirit had the upper hand, and I could

well believe what Hawkins, his soldier servant, said of him, half regretfully:

"Ah, Miss, the master isn't the man he was before he found religion! He never has none of the old rages now, and the langwidge he'd scatter in them days was—well, it was lively. Sometimes I do feel sorry for him tryin' to satisfy himself with 'dashes' and 'bloomin's', and often I've thought he'd do himself a mischief through not havin' the old words to let himself go on. Not but what he did change the face of the rig'mint before he left, an' a good thing too. An' terrible down on langwidge he was. Why, 'e got rid of the rig'mintal parrot because it wouldn't change its ways."

But all this belongs to a later stage, when I had learned to appreciate and love the dear old General, and to bless the hour he came to settle at Rose Hill.





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STORY OF A SORROW.

AFTER that I continued my work of arranging General MacNeill's library with a mind very much at rest, and in a spirit of thorough enjoyment. I saw now no necessary end to my use of this delightful place, for soon after we had made friends the General presented me with a key to the garden entrance of the library.

"It's a symbol," he said, "of your right to come and go without consulting me or anyone else, and I thought you'd like to have it, though of course there'd be always someone to open the door to you, and no one at all to say you nay."

He was quite right. That symbolical key did add to my happiness in the library, for I no longer felt an outsider, but as one who had an inalienable right there.

The General never interfered with my work, except to approve of it, and occasionally to insist that I should sit down and read and rest myself when I was very anxious to get on with my librarian's work. "Very good, very good!" I would hear him say behind my back while I worked; and I would just toss him a greeting from off

my ladder and go on, while he went briskly back to his own work. We never talked except during the more or less long half-hour we gave to our tea.

The General was tremendously energetic, and he was working hard those days getting things into order. No one, he determined, should place his bric-a-brac or statuary or pictures but himself; he had an extreme sense of tidiness, and was fidgety about his things. He would have no help from the women servants. He and Hawkins did all the unpacking and hanging and setting up. I could understand better now his angry indignation when he found me handling his books, and took me for a maid-servant, and I was quite proud of the immense compliment he paid me when he left me so much to my own guidance among them.

He was not exactly a reading man, though he could enjoy an hour with a book and a pipe as much as any man living. A great part of his library had come down to him from his grandfather, the Bishop of Westchester, and he had added to it with knowledge and pleasure, yet without any very overweening delight in the books as books. He told me once that he liked books about fighting, whether the fight was in the natural or the spiritual world. The *Iliad* or the *Holy War* equally appealed to him, and in *The Soldier's Pocket-Book*, or the last treatise on gunnery, he was pretty equally at home.

When we met at tea-time, we each gave a report of what we had been doing. The General himself always fed Paudeen with a few Naples biscuits and a little

saucer full of milk-and-water, after which he was dismissed. "Now, right about face—march!" the General would say, adding, "Discipline is necessary for little dogs as well as for human beings if they are not to infringe the rights of others." And Paudeen soon understood that at "March!" he was to retire to the mat and ask for no more food.

Sometimes after tea I went, at the General's request, to see what he had been doing. Rose Hill was going to be a very beautiful house, I thought, not being used to the rich colours and deep dyes of the carpets and draperies, of which the General had a great profusion. These made a fine background for the statues and the pottery and bronzes and silver. I used to think it all too beautiful for an old soldier, whose own tastes I gathered to be quite simple. Once I said something of the kind to him. We were great friends by this time, and I could risk being impertinent. He had called me to see a Clytie in front of a piece of Indian embroidery, purple, bronze, and scarlet.

"She's lovely," said I heartily. "What a beautiful house you will have presently, and all for yourself, General!"

"Ah!" said he, "you're thinking it's thrown away on the old soldier."

"Oh, no," I said hastily, "I didn't mean that!"

"You did, child, and you were thinking as well, though you'd be too gentle to own it even to yourself, that I am an old fool for gathering such things when a few years

must see them sent to the hammer. And you're right, so far as you know. But when I was gathering them I had no thought of surrounding my own worn-out old life with beauty and luxury."

He sighed and turned away, and I remembered how he had spoken before of someone who had taken his angry words seriously and had left him. I felt very sorry for the General, and very indignant against that unknown person, whom I only wished I had there to give a bit of my mind to.

"Why don't you have your sister to live with you, General?" I asked, for he had told me he had a sister living in London.

"What, Lucy!" he cried. "Oh, we'd be flint and steel! The same house wouldn't hold the two of us for long, though we're really attached to each other. Wait till you've seen Lucy, and you'll understand what a preposterous suggestion you've made, young lady."

I had told Aline in my letters about General MacNeill, and how I was enjoying myself arranging his books, and by return had came a perfect tornado of messages from Lady O'Brien to her old friend, and a letter from Aline saying how glad she was I had found such a solace in my loneliness as my visits to Rose Hill. I really was not sorry now that I had missed Kilkee. I felt sure I should not have enjoyed it half so much as I was enjoying my life at home.

One afternoon the General walked home with me, and made the acquaintance of the twins—whom at first his

aspect nearly put to flight—and the two boys. He became great friends with them. The boys were quick to recognize in him the boyishness that in a sense placed them on a level, while there were all his achievements, which they had learned—Heaven knows how—to give the friendship that romantic tinge of hero-worship which just made it perfect. The meeting resulted in a visit to Rose Hill, which was the first of many. By this time the house was getting into order, and the General was, as he would have said, off duty; and as for me, they never disturbed me. I might slip away after tea, and leave the party on the lawn, following those diagrams of the General's in which he showed how a battle was fought.

I have laughed to look back and see the stiff old veteran and the boys all down on their knees making a battle-field in the gravel of the path, while the little girls peered between them, scarcely less fascinated.

Nor was the General always the *raconteur*. He was ready to listen with kindling eyes to the story of the big trout caught below the Lacken Falls last May, or that wonderful adventure when the boys had climbed to the eagle's eyrie, happily during the bird's absence, and had discovered a perfect charnel-house. It was a feat never repeated, for Aline had been so frightened about it, and so stern, that they had taken her will for law.

"Fine boys, fine spirited lads!" the General said to me one day. "They ought to be serving Her Majesty. They're cut out for soldiers."

"Not both of them, General," said I. "We want one boy at home to take care of so many women."

"He'd take care of you all the better for a few years' soldiering. However, duty's duty, and if the lad sees his post is here, and he can find work to occupy him, let him stay. Why isn't the second lad at Sandhurst?"

"Sandhurst means money, General."

"Pooh!" he said very fiercely, "what is money?"

"A commodity which we Brandons lack very much."

He looked at me sharply, and muttered to himself that something must be done; the fine lads couldn't be allowed to loaf the best part of their lives away; but as he didn't speak to me, I took no notice of what he said, and the matter dropped.

A day or two later, when the General was having one of his field-days with the boys and the twins, I heard them all come in from the lawn, and tramp upstairs to the General's private domain. I did not hear them come back, and presently the tea was brought in and set on a table.

"Ring the bell, Jane," said I.

Jane rang the bell and departed, but no one came. The tea stood some minutes, and then I rang again, but with no result.

"Ah!" said I to myself, "they are so absorbed in their discussion that they have not heard." And so I went in search of them.

I found my way to them by the low hum of voices, and when I entered the room where they were I came

upon the whole party bending over a table on which there was an open map. The General was tracing for them the path of a retreat, and so absorbed were they that they did not hear me come in.

I looked about me with interest. The room was bare even to nakedness. A little iron bed stood in one corner. There was a high wooden desk, a few penitential chairs, a bath with a can of cold water standing in it, a shelf with a few shabby books obviously of a devotional kind. On the wall, between some soberly-coloured texts, were one or two prints of famous soldiers; and above the mantel-piece, with its row of pipes, its pistol-cases, and a long sword in its scabbard, there hung a portrait in pastel of a young man, the one bit of colour in the room.

I gazed at it fascinated. It recalled to my memory the young man who had been so kind that day long ago at Annagassan Races. Why, it was he surely—the expression, the eyes, the mouth, at once grave and humorous. I had not forgotten him all those years, and I had no doubt about him now. How strange to find his picture here in General MacNeill's room!

“Hullo!” said Hugh, suddenly espying me. “Here’s Hilda. You’ll have to do it all over again for her, General.”

“Perhaps you don’t know,” said I, “that the tea’s been standing a quarter of an hour, and the bell has rung twice. It’s not what I call discipline, General.”

“No more it isn’t,” said the General gaily. “I’ve been training the young recruits badly, but we were fighting,

Miss Hilda, and in war-time we take a snack when we can. Run away, youngsters, run away, or the tea won't bear drinking."

The next day when we were alone I spoke to General MacNeill about the portrait, with a curious shyness for which I was at a loss to account.

"Ah, the portrait!" he said after me. "You noticed it. And what did you think of it, my dear?"

A film came over the fine blue eyes, and I was half-sorry I had spoken of it, yet I was very curious to find out who the original was.

"I'm not interested in it as a work of art," I said, "but I can't help fancying that I once saw the original."

"Did you, now?" said the General with eager excitement. "Like enough, my dear. He was stationed close by here with his regiment some years ago."

"It's the very same," said I. "I thought I remembered the eyes and the mouth. I wonder the boys didn't notice it; but perhaps they've forgotten him. They were only children then."

"How did you meet him? Tell me everything about it," cried the General, and in his excitement the film of suffering rolled away from his eyes, and left them bright once more.

I told him the story of my accident.

"Ah," he kept saying, "that was so like my Lance! Yes, yes; Lance was always so kind and clever. He kept his wits about him when other people got theirs scattered. Ah, good boy! good boy!" and so on.

When I had finished he sank into a reverie, so that he forgot to tell me who Lance was. I had to recall it to his memory.

"I have often wished," said I, "to know the name of the gentleman who befriended us in so timely a way, but in the confusion I never asked, and afterwards we found that he had gone away. I don't even know to this day."

"Why, bless me, haven't I told you? Lance is my boy, my own boy, my son."

"Why, to be sure he is," said I. "Now I know how it is that when you look kind and funny you have reminded me of somebody. Of course the colour is all different, but the expression is the same."

"In looks Lance is the image of his dear sainted young mother. But I daresay there is an expression, as you have seen."

"Why isn't he with you, then?" said I bluntly.

The General lifted his eyes upwards, and again the strange film of suffering came over them.

"For five years now," he said, "I have not known if my son is dead or living."

"Poor General!" said I stupidly, feeling for the moment as if I too had had a blow.

"I deserved my punishment," he went on in a low voice. "I had not then learned to bury my will in the Will. I was a hot-headed, wilful, evil-tempered old man, though even then the Light was leading me. I tried to force my will on the boy, and when he would not have

it, for he too had a will of his own and something of a temper, I bade him begone, never thinking he would take me at my word. But he did, and from that hour to this I was alone till you came."

"But why don't you ask him to come back?" said I.

"He volunteered for special service in Afghanistan, and there he disappeared. Whether he was killed or taken prisoner, none knows, except God. But I am sure that if he could have come to me, he would have come long ago. His anger against me could not have endured all these years."

"You poor, poor old man!" said I, beginning to cry: the story had made me feel so lonely and forlorn.

The General came round and stroked my hair tenderly.

"Good little girl!" he said, "to be so sorry for an old man's trouble." But indeed I felt as if the trouble were my own. "There, my dear," he went on. "Don't spoil your pretty eyes. Kneel down with me now, and let us resign ourselves to the Will. Wherever my boy is, and it is hard not to know what is befalling him, he is never out of reach of the Power and the Love."

We knelt down then, and the poor old General poured out a prayer which I thought most heart-breaking in its pathos. I seemed to realize, as he revealed his heart unconsciously, all the fears my old friend had had to endure for his boy in the hands of a cruel enemy. The prayer seemed to help and comfort both of us. When we stood up I took the General's brown old hand in mine.

"I am sure he will come back," I said fervently.

"Thank you, my dear, thank you," he said hastily; and then he added, "I am sure you are a blessing, a helper and comfort sent from God to a lonely old man."

Then he told me how he had come to quarrel with his son. He had tried to make a marriage for him with a certain Miss Milbank, and when the young man had refused to accept his father's choice for him the hasty quarrel had ensued.

"Now, my dear," said the old General sadly, "you understand how it is that I come to have so many pretty things. I would have given up everything to them, so long as they kept me in a corner of their hearts, and a corner of their pretty house, where I could look on at my boy's happiness, and see perhaps the little grandchildren growing up about me. I wanted to settle him, to ensure his happiness, as if I could be his Providence. Well, well, and I thought May Milbank cared for him, but afterwards I found that I was all wrong."

"Dear General," said I again, "I am quite sure he will come back."



CHAPTER XIX.

I VISIT THE GREAT WORLD.

IT must not be imagined that during those happy weeks I had been quite forgetting my novel. On the contrary, it grew steadily during the morning hours in which I worked at it, and it was not the worse, I am sure, for the new pleasantness that had come into my life.

As time went on, and the friendship between myself and the General throve, I even allowed myself to be persuaded to read him some chapters of it; and finding him so full of interest and so excellent a critic, I went on with the reading of it as it grew. He had all the love of a story which belonged to the youthfulness of his heart, and I found that the more romantic I grew—and I had been rather shy of the romantic passages at first—the keener grew his interest.

Indeed, he took my characters as seriously as if they had been living men and women, and would argue with me vehemently about the exact course of conduct that might have been expected from one or another,—a delightfully flattering thing to an author. In nine cases out of ten he was right, and I was not too proud to

accept his suggestions, so that the book, as it grew, came really to have a part of the General in it, and I used to say we had better publish in collaboration.

I was going to look for a publisher for *Love in the Valley*, though I did not at all expect to be like those silly people in novels who make tremendous successes with a very first book. I expected to have a very stiff, uphill fight before I should even see my name on the title-page of a book.

"And when I do see it," I said to the General, "it will not be my first book. Why, my first book was burnt early in my teens!"

The interest the General took in my hero, Maurice Westwater, was something really touching.

"However you've managed it, young woman," he said, "you've made a success of that lad. Somehow he reminds me of my own boy."

As all the General's suggestions about the development of Maurice's character tended, I felt sure, to make him more and more a portrait of Lance, I was not surprised if, by and by, the likeness came to be more than a shadowy one.

One fine September afternoon brought Aline home, and overjoyed I was to see her. The sea-breezes had given her dear fair cheeks a touch of brown which delighted me, while her step was brisk, and her eyes tranquil as I had hardly dared to hope.

The very first thing she did when she came into the house, before she removed her wraps, was to go upstairs

to Pierce's room, which Oona had kept all those months with drawn blinds. She remained there only a few seconds, but in the time she had drawn up the blinds, and flung all the windows open to the sweet air.

"I am going to put the twins next door to you, Hilda," she said when she returned, "and keep for myself that room which has known so much of heaven."

While she drank her tea we all gathered about her, and poured out our stories about the new tenant of Rose Hill, and the joys of his domicile.

Aline listened with her maternal smile.

"What a kind old man he must be!" she said in a pause of the crowding voices.

"Not so old as all that amounts to," said one of the boys rather resentfully. "You don't call sixty old, Aline?"

"Well, I don't call it exactly young," said Aline, smiling. "Still, I thought your friend was older, more Lady O'Brien's contemporary."

"Oh! he knew her when he was quite a young fellow and she was a married woman, long after she took Peter," said Hugh.

"Dear boy!" said Aline. "Peter!"

"Well, doesn't she always call him so herself?" pleaded Hugh, unabashed.

"Why, he has a son no older than you, Aline," said Cusha, the younger of the twins.

"Oh, a son!" said Aline; "and where is he?"

"They don't know. He went with a party to Kabul,

and the whole of them disappeared. 'Awkins thinks it as likely as not that he was tortured and killed."

"Cusha!" cried I, "have you been talking to Hawkins? Not 'Awkins, remember."

"'Awkins he calls himself, and I did talk to him a little, wee bit."

"The twins," said Hugh, with a grin, "think no end of Hawkins. Why, they're always talking to him, and the General knows, and says Hawkins will teach them nothing but good. Why, he's drilling them now, and he's teaching them to ride! He says they're the gamiest little ladies he ever heard tell on."

"I hope they haven't been running wild," said Aline, with an apprehensive glance at me.

However, I was sure the General was right, and that his soldier-servant was fit to be trusted with our little sisters.

A day or two later the General and Lady O'Brien met at Brandon, and such a delightful interchange there was of reminiscence and compliment that we younger ones hardly got in a word. Esther, I thought, after her absence, looked listless and preoccupied. I was very anxious to know how affairs were going with her, and got her to myself after a while. But she had really nothing to tell. Her lover had wished to write to her during their absence from each other, but she had forbidden it, and then, woman-like, she was half-sorry.

"He hates the secrecy as much as I do," she said, wringing her hands, "and is always anxious to speak. Now I

think I shall let him. I do not feel that we are so helpless now that I have gran."—by this name she had come to call Lady O'Brien,—“and I am sure the General would help us if we needed help. I used to feel that we were only a parcel of friendless girls and children caught in the net of that wicked old spider who ruined us.”

She shuddered violently.

“I dream of Sir Rupert at nights, of him and that wicked man of his—terrible dreams of injury and death to my Harry. I can't make him see his grandfather as I see him, nor believe the necessity of watching him as one would watch a wild beast. I have the fear for two, the loneliness and the helplessness.”

“Poor Essie!” I said; “you are all nerves. Why, how you tremble! This must be put a stop to, Essie, or I'll speak myself. After all, what can Sir Rupert do except turn his grandson adrift? We are in a law-abiding country, more or less, within reach of police and magistrates, and the strong arm of the law generally. You are making yourself nightmares, darling.”

“That is what Harry says; but I cannot shake off the fear. Do you remember that when I was a child I used to dream of him, of Sir Rupert and his dogs, and scream out at nights. It is so lonely up there at Angry that anything might be done, and no one a whit the wiser.”

“Now, Essie,” said I, “if this goes on you'll make yourself ill, and then who is to see after Harry? He is wiser than you are. Let him tell Lady O'Brien that you love each other, and let him tell Aline also. Promise me that

you will. I am sure you will not find Aline hard, and your godmother will be, I am sure, all on your side."

Esther promised me, and looked happier when she had given the promise.

A day or two later something very surprising and delightful happened. The General came over to see Aline in the afternoon, and mentioned in the course of conversation that he had to go to London on business, which would probably occupy him a week.

"I shall stay with my sister in Bloomsbury," he said, "and I was thinking that you might perhaps be so kind as to trust Miss Hilda to my care. There is a little bit of business we might be about arranging while we're there."

"It would be very nice for her, General, and she has had no holiday, poor dear!" said Aline. "It is very kind of you, indeed. But the business?"

"Ah! Miss Brandon, that is Miss Hilda's secret, unless she likes to share it with you."

"Are you sure she knows it herself, General?" said I, with a wild hope springing up in my heart.

"Well, this is the way of it, Miss Brandon," said the General. "This very industrious young lady has, it seems, not only arranged my library for me, like a born librarian, and even begun to catalogue it, but she has written a novel, or the big end of one, during your summer holiday."

"A novel, Hilda!" cried Aline with hands upraised.

"And a very excellent one, if I'm any judge at all," said

the General; "but we want an expert opinion, and I'm going to ask my old friend Linklater, of Linklater, Lee, & Warner, Paternoster Square, to pronounce upon it. I believe he'll read it himself for my sake, and let us know the result within a week."

"Oh dear General!" cried I, "what an angel you are!"

"My dear child, you've been very good to me, and it's nothing at all, nothing," said the General hastily. "So I may write to Lucy, Miss Brandon, to say I'm bringing a young lady?"

"Thank you very much, General. It won't be troublesome to Miss MacNeill?"

"Lucy'll be delighted. She'll be for taking the child to half the societies in London that affect her particular views. Lucy is a good soul, though we don't agree on many points. There, Miss Hilda, don't look alarmed. You and I are going to have a real good holiday-time and see the sights. Lucy shall only have you when there's something really pleasant to see or do."

I made joyful arrangements for my little expedition, and the question of frocks was set at ease by Lady O'Brien's having just presented me with an autumn outfit exactly like Esther's, only differing in colour. A long blue-gray cloak with a fur collar, and a smart little felt hat with an eagle's feather, made me all right for travelling, and I was not likely to have social engagements that would require fine indoor raiment.

The journey was a delight to me, though I certainly

got a little tired on the way up to Dublin. However, a Turkish bath, which the General prescribed for me, and a good dinner did wonders; and afterwards we went down to Kingstown, where I had a snug little cabin to myself on the mail-boat, and slept all night like a top. Indeed I awoke to the swaying of the boat and the swish of water under the port-holes, and to hear the stewardess saying that we would have just time for breakfast before getting into Holyhead.

I felt it delightful to be taken such care of as I was on that journey. A man's kindness is, I think, always more touching and even more complete than a woman's; and the dear old General seemed to think of me at every turn. Then he had such a way of making railway porters, and people like that, fly to obey him that we seemed to get everything done for us sooner than other passengers. I could see that he "tipped" generously, but it wasn't that, for how could they know beforehand? Perhaps his way of looking in a towering passion imposed on them, though with my knowledge of him it made me laugh to think of anyone being afraid of the General.

When we reached Euston our luggage—there was not very much of it—was piled on top of a hansom, which I thought such a strange and delightful vehicle, and the General gave an address which I did not catch, but which certainly sounded different from Bloomsbury. When he had got inside he explained to me.

"We are going to dine before we go to my sister's, my dear. My sister has some very odd ideas about food, as

you'll discover presently, and I take all my meals out when I'm with her. But when we get to her you must follow my example, and pretend to eat. Don't say you have not had your dinner—there is no such thing as a white lie, child—but *seem* to eat when she sets the things before you."

"But won't she know we're very late?" said I.

"Not she. Lucy's meals occur according to the hours she comes in from her committee meetings. She never knows what hour it is apart from those."

We had a most enchanting meal at a very gorgeous French restaurant, all lit with electric light and very gay with coloured shades and flowers and mirrors—and such odd, odd people.

"I thought you'd like it," said the General, highly pleased at my little cries of rapture. "Personally I prefer the Blue Posts, but there is a man here who can cook a sirloin, and you can enjoy the kickshaws."

I did enjoy the long *menu* very much indeed, and rather pitied the General and his plain fare. When we had finished, he rose up and uttered a sigh.

"And now for Lucy," he said.

I began to feel rather alarmed about Miss MacNeill. However, there was always the General to befriend me, so I plucked up heart of grace.

When we reached Bloomsbury Square, the houses of which seemed to me very high and gloomy, the door was opened to us by a pretty little maid, who beamed all over at seeing the General.

"Well, Phyllis," said he, "how are you, and how's your mistress?"

"Quite well, thank you, sir. The mistress has only just come in. She will be with you in a minute, sir."

"Just take this young lady upstairs to get her hat off, and make her very comfortable, Phyllis. Mind, very comfortable, like a good girl."

"That I shall, sir," said Phyllis with a pretty smile.

I found my bedroom very dainty, and what amazed me in London, it looked into a great chestnut tree, of which the leaves were all a warm lovely gold.

"Why, how comfortable I shall be, Phyllis!" said I. "It all looks so nice."

"Yes, don't it, Miss?" said Phyllis. "'Tis a very comfortable 'ouse, only for the eating, which it is awful."

I noticed that Phyllis pronounced her "h's" very curiously, but I shall not attempt to reproduce her pronunciation.

"The mistress she's vegetarian, Miss, and expects everyone to fill 'emselves with what I calls garbage. An' as for beer, you wouldn't get a drop, not if it was ever so. But cook, she's recommended by the Vegetarian League, an' supposed to be strict. She 'as a joint sent in reg'lar by the greengrocer, an' put down for artichokes an' such like. So we gets our bit. There, poor girls has to take care of theirselves"—and, with a defiant little flounce of her head, as if she rebutted my imaginary objections, pretty Phyllis marched out of the room.

I found Miss MacNeill a very brisk old lady, with

bright eyes and rosy cheeks and white teeth, quite like what the General would have been if he had lived at home in peace and a temperate climate.

She had been to a meeting of the Anti-Animal Food Society, and was very full of the subject. She told some very dreadful stories, and had a way of flinging them at the General's head as if he were a monster of cruelty, though, I am sure, poor dear, he loves the animals as much as anyone could, and the greeting between him and his sister's asthmatic pug and waddling poodle had been very pleasant to witness.

He bore his sister's stories wonderfully for a while, I suppose because he was conscious of his own deceit about the dinner. At last he got testy.

"Drop it, Lucy!" he cried; "can't you see you're making this child quite pale? It isn't a subject for dinner anyhow."

"Yet, Hugh," said Miss Lucy with a little spark of battle coming into her eye, "I've seen you sitting down to a meal of bleeding flesh which didn't seem to repel you the least bit in the world."

The General recovered his temper suddenly.

"That was in the old days, my dear," he said.

"Ah, if I could really believe you were changed!" she sighed.

"Anyhow," he said hastily, "here's this child sending away her food untasted."

I thought this low of the General.

"You mustn't take things to heart, my dear," said Miss

Lucy kindly. "What you're eating has caused suffering to nothing that lives. There, I must go slow with you, I see. But after you've been a week in this house, my dear, you'll never see meat eaten again without a shudder. I've just brought out a new pamphlet, Hugh—'The Feeder on Flesh, or the Human Vampire'. The League tells me it is most successful."

"I dare say," grunted the General. "But what is this I am eating now, Lucy? Some sort of truffle? It isn't half-bad."

"We call it vegetarian beefsteak. It is a sort of toadstool which grows on rotting bark," said Miss Lucy, looking pleased.

"Great Heaven! Lucy, do you want to poison us? Don't touch a bit of it, Hilda. I don't mind being dosed, Lucy, but when it comes to being poisoned it's another matter. I wish you'd tell us beforehand the constituents of your . . . feeds."

It is impossible to reproduce the contempt and loathing which the General managed to impress into the last word. Miss Lucy smiled placidly. I noticed after a time that when the General grew angry she became calm.

"Ah, Hugh, Hugh," she said with an air of affectionate reproof, "if you'd only give up your horrible bloodthirsty diet how your temper would be the gainer, to be sure!"



CHAPTER XX.

FREDA'S MYSTERY.

MISS LUCY," said I next morning at breakfast, "do you know the way to Parson's Green?"

"Parson's Green—let me see. It's somewhere beyond Chelsea, I think."

"What do you want to know for, child?" asked the General.

"I have a sister living there whom I wish very much to see."

"Ah! you'd better go to-day then, for I've to spend a tiresome morning over business. We can meet again in the afternoon, and I'll take you to a theatre in the evening. Perhaps Lucy would come too."

"Not I," said Miss Lucy, good-temperedly. "My theatre-going days are over. I wonder that you, with your convictions, Hugh, would be seen in such places."

"I saw a play once," said the General simply, "called 'The Flag of England'. The hero was a very brave man and a good soldier. I thought that anyone must be the better for seeing it. Of course, I don't know much about theatres, Lucy, but I thought I'd like to show this young

lady some gaieties. Perhaps you could advise me where to take her?"

"I was going to offer to take her to the annual meeting of the Society for the Abolition of the British Army."

"No societies please, Lucy," said the General a little gruffly.

"I forgot you were a man of blood," said Miss Lucy, "and didn't mean to be personal, Hugh. But about your theatres, if you'll stick to Shakespeare and Adelphi drama, I think you'll be quite safe. You'd better book seats for Irving in *Henry V.*"

"Thank you, Lucy, I will," said the General meekly. And then turning to me: "If you've quite finished breakfast, my dear, you'd better come along. I'll put you on the way for Parson's Green."

I said I had quite finished. I had eaten a little porridge, but found nothing else that I could eat. Eggs were forbidden according to Miss Lucy's creed, and though she had made a concession to my weakness so far as to allow me milk, she ate her own porridge with treacle and drank her coffee black, because, as she said, "she'd feel that she was robbing the innocent offspring of the cow if she were to do as we were doing."

I felt rather hungry as I stood up, but I really couldn't face Miss Lucy's macaroni and haricot beans at a meal which I always like best of all the meals of the day.

When I came downstairs with my outdoor things on, Miss MacNeill looked at me critically.

"What kind of a feather is that you are wearing, my dear?" she asked a little sharply.

"An eagle's feather," I answered.

"I hope they don't tear it from the living bird," she said severely.

"It would be worse for them if they did," said I. "It is a feather the boys found on the side of Brandon which the golden eagle had dropped from his wing."

"Oh, I suppose if he dropped it there can be no wrong to him in your picking it up?"

"I should think not," said the General. "Be easy about Hilda, Lucy. She's as incapable of cruelty as you would be yourself. You won't find her wearing ospreys."

"Oh no, indeed!" I asserted fervently, "I wouldn't if I were to go hatless all my days."

"My sister's a good woman," said the General, as we went down the steps together, "and is right about many things though she does get hold of the wrong end of the stick often. Still, I daresay if I had her convictions I'd act up to them as she does. Aren't you hungry, my dear?"

"I am rather, General."

"So am I. I've been saving myself for breakfast. There is a quiet little hotel near here where we can get fresh eggs and kidneys done to a turn. Mind, my dear, you are never to make yourself ill eating Lucy's messes. Fortunately she's not very observant, dear woman, and you've only to pretend to eat. I'll see that you have all your proper meals, my dear."

We had a very snug little breakfast together, which I enjoyed the more that I had been making up my mind to endure hunger till I got to Freda's. What was to happen if Freda was out after my long journey I would not allow myself to think.

When we sallied into the street again the General accosted a very burly policeman and asked him the best way to get to Parson's Green.

"There's the thrain an' there's the bus," said the policeman, to my surprise, in a brogue that might have walked out of Brandon village yesterday.

"Can we get to it by way of Threadneedle Street?" asked the General, whose business lay that way.

"Ye cud," said the giant with a genial smile that robbed the speech of any suggestion of impertinence, "just the same way as ye'd get to the spot I'm stannin' on be way av Chaney an' Americay. That is, ye'd be turnin' your back on it all the time till ye pulled up straight forenint it. Now, look here, sir," with a change of tone to one of the liveliest concern, "if I was you I wouldn't be putting her in them dirty thrains this fine day. 'Tis an elegant ride a-top o' the bus from Piccadilly Circus."

"Is it too far for a cab ride?" said the General abruptly.

"Not if yez have the money to pay for it. 'Tis half-a-crown be justice, three an' six be fairity."

"We'll have the hansom, then," said the General.

"Ye'll be makin' no mistake, sir," said the policeman,

"an' here's the best horse on the rank just trottin' up in the nick of time."

The General put me in carefully, and then pressed something into my hand. I looked down at the gold in my palm.

"I ought to go with you by right, and would if I could, my dear," he said with a face that admitted of no denial. "Remember this little holiday is entirely my affair. Have you silver?"

I said I had.

"Well, then, hansom back; remember I shall have you on my mind till I see you again. But your sister will put you in a cab."

The cab journey seemed to me interminably long, and yet there was no sign of green fields. At first our way lay through very fine streets, with beautiful shops, and crowded with such traffic as I had never dreamt of. I found the hansom more exhilarating than any form of progression I have ever known since I used to ride Pat Maloney's colt barebacked in the old days; and I felt very much excited about going to see Freda and her dear little boy. Despite an occasional qualm of doubt about Freda, my affection for her was as strong as ever, and from sheer excitement I felt myself turning hot and cold.

Still, I thought it must be a long long way to Parson's Green yet, for we were now going through miles of mean little streets full of tiny pea-soup-coloured houses all exactly alike and indescribably monotonous. I was

amusing myself by trying to discover what it was those wonderful costers were shouting, when suddenly the hansom pulled up before one of a hundred little houses, and the man shouted down on the top of my head:

"Now, Miss, Magnoliar Cottage. 'Ere you are!"

"Oh!" cried I, "are you quite sure? Is this Grove Avenue? It isn't at all the kind of place I meant. Are you quite sure this is Parson's Green?"

"All right, Miss!" he replied stolidly, "Magnoliar Cottage, Grove Avenue, Parson's Green. See it wrote up there on the corner of the road."

I looked and saw a plate with "Grove Avenue" inscribed on it, and above the door of the house, in ridiculous stucco work, I read "Magnolia Cottage". I descended, bewildered and doubtful, and let the cab go half unwillingly. There must be another Parson's Green, and when I had discovered my mistake how should I ever find another cab in this wilderness of shabby little houses?

However, the man drove off, and I knocked at the door. It was opened by a little maid of about fifteen, quite neat, with her white cap and apron, and quite unconscious of the large smut on her little perked-up nose.

"Oh, please," said I, in a voice which was, I am sure, full of distress, "does Mrs. Hazeldine live here?"

"She do, miss," said the little maid, in a most sympathetic voice. "Please to walk in. I'm expectin' of her shortly, an' Mrs. Vincent too, that 'as gone to take

Master Jacky a walk on the Common. You've 'ad 'ard work, I expec', to find the 'ouse. Most people 'as."

She ushered me into a little room, quite pretty and refined, though there wasn't an article of substantial furniture in it except a piano. However, with frilled muslin curtains, and a few water-colours on the wall, low chintz-covered chairs, and a hanging-shelf of books, to say nothing of a canary singing in the window and a bow-pot of autumn leaves, it was surprising what cheerful results were obtainable. There was the tiniest spark of fire in the grate, but it was burning briskly, for the morning had a touch of frost. Still, the place was very, very poor, though anyone could see that it belonged to ladies. I began to guess dimly that our dear, loving, foolish Freda had been deceiving us all those years since Jim's death.

Presently there was the click of a latch-key outside, and in came Freda herself, looking so tired and worn, and rather shabbily dressed. She cried out when she saw me, and we flew into each other's arms. When she released me at last, she looked at me with a mixture of shamefacedness and fun in her expression, which recalled the old happy Freda of long ago.

"Well, darling," she said, "and what do you think of Magnolia Cottage?"

"Oh, Freda, you bad girl!" I answered, "why did you deceive us all like this?"

"It was rather silly, I acknowledge, for I was sure to be found out some time. Still, I certainly did not in-

augurate the deception. Aline chose to believe me a rich woman, and since the belief seemed a comfort to her, I let it stand; I thought it would be a blow to her if I were to undeceive her, and she would fret about us, and want Jacky and me at Brandon, where already, as I well know, there is little enough to spare."

"No," I said; "now I think of it, you never did contribute a brick to our air-built castle. The only thing was that you seemed to stay in fine houses, and meet fine people, and all that."

"In some houses even the governess is allowed to meet the guests,—not in all, though."

"Still, I think Aline will be hurt, Freda. You should have trusted her."

"Ah! well, if I did wrong I was punished. I have felt often and often that you must all think me such a mean wretch, rolling in riches, and never doing anything for any of you. I often felt inclined to throw it up and confess. Perhaps I distrusted myself, for there have been times when I grew tired of the struggle, and if Aline had known and had said 'Come', I would have been spiritless enough to come, and to stay. Still, the times have not been many," she said more brightly. "The world has not been bad to me, as a whole, and I had always my dear old friend to come to, and she kept my boy for me, more tenderly than I could myself."

"This room is really pretty, Freda."

"The rooms are all pretty, I think, because a woman like Mary Vincent dwells in them, and imparts some-

thing of the fragrance of herself to them. In Magnolia Cottage it is possible to forget Grove Avenue."

"And just think, Freda; we took your house, from the extreme rurality of its title, to be situated in a delicious country place."

"We rather run to rural titles in our London slums. See, over there is the 'Daisies', and next door the 'Grass-plot', yonder the 'Hawthorns' and the 'Laburnums' face each other."

"Who lives in them?"

"Usually working-men and their very large families. We're considered guilty of sinful waste, so Polly, our handmaiden, tells us, because we don't let lodgings. But come upstairs and see the rest of the domicile. You'll take off your hat and cloak and stay for a good long day. Oh, by the way, you haven't told me yet how you come to be here!"

I told her, as I was taking off my hat and washing my hands,—which I was surprised to find seemed to require constant washing in London,—about the General, and his business and my business, and that I had not to meet him till six o'clock.

"How lucky I was at home!" she cried. "We are going to have such a long long gossip, for though Aline's so faithful a letter-writer there are a thousand-and-one things that never get into letters. Yet, if you had come last week you would have found only Mrs. Vincent and Jacky. I have just left a place, and am going on to another next week."

"You poor dear!" said I. "The last must have been a very nasty place, to make you look so tired as you did when you came in."

"It was rather nasty," she said, "but the next is going to be much nicer. It is in a lovely part of Devonshire too, and I shall like the lady to whom I am going."

When we had left the pretty little chintz-hung bedroom and were seated at the fire downstairs, I asked Freda how it was she came to be so poor.

"Jim had saved nothing," she said. "He always meant to, poor love, but he was so generous, and then he never could have feared that his wife and boy would want. You know his parents are extremely wealthy, and he was their favourite son."

"Yet they let you want."

"They didn't know. I must do them that much justice. They thought I was left comfortably. But they must have had a strange opinion of me, for they offered to adopt my Jacky and make him heir to all their money. I took the suggestion as an insult, and walked out of the house. I have never heard of them since, and I am sure Jacky and I have disappeared as effectually from their ken as if the sea had opened and swallowed us."

"What horrid people!" cried I impulsively.

"They are very good people in their own way," answered Freda quietly. "But they are bitterly prejudiced, Lady Hazeldine especially. It was a great blow to her when Jim married a wild Irish girl. Especially as

she had wanted him to marry a great pet of hers, a city heiress named Cicely Lambton. She had wished for it almost from the babyhood of both, for she and Mrs. Lambton were school-friends. I believe she thought that if Jim had married an English girl he would not have died."

"Stupid woman!" said I, not knowing how to express my indignation against Jim's mother to Jim's widow. "Why, she ought to have loved you a thousand times better because you loved Jim and he loved you, and you both have lost him."

"That doesn't always follow, little Hilda. Perhaps I shall not love the woman who will, one day, step into the first place in Jacky's heart and evict me."

"Tell me, Freda," said I, "have you had horrible times? Is it so bad for her 'who fareth up and down another's stairs'?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I have met hard and unkind, as well as gentle and kind people. Yet, on the whole, I am not sorry that I have had to work. It would have been worse if I had had to sit down with folded hands and look at the wreck of my life,—worse surely amid the Hazeldine luxury, worse even at dear Brandon. Ah, no, no! work has made it possible for me to live."

Her face had assumed a very tragic expression, the face now of a woman of many sorrows.

"It has been sweet too," she went on, her tense expression relaxing a little, "to help to keep up this little home. Always, if things grew too hard for me, there were peace

and love waiting for me here. Ah, the poor women without such a spot on earth!—how I pity them! And then there was always saving up for me a delicious thing that I looked at in my moments of leisure, the thought of coming home to Jacky.”

Her face softened, and went back into the little roundnesses and dimples I remembered. Then she laughed, and it was like the sun coming out.

“Why, here is Jacky!” she cried out; and I saw a sweet-faced elderly woman and a swaggering small sailor pass the little bow-window.

She ran out and opened the door, and with a word to her friend came back, proudly leading her son.

“Hullo!” said he, with the free manner of a born son of Neptune, “you’re a pretty girl, but you aren’t half as pretty as my Muddie!”

“Oh Jacky, Jacky, you rude boy! and you silly boy as well! This is your dear pretty Auntie Hilda come to see you. Go up and say ‘How d’ye do?’ nicely, and kiss her.”

“How d’ye do?” he said, swaggering up to me with his hands in both pockets. “I’ll tell you what I’d like very much. A guinea-pig, or else a white rat. You don’t happen to have thought of bringin’ one? Hey?”

Freda burst out laughing even while she tried to stiffen her features to an expression of rebuke. I looked from her to the curly golden head and blue eyes of the boy. Ah, well! Freda is a happier woman than most, though she is a widow indeed.



M 436

"FREDA CAME BACK, PROUDLY LEADING HER SON."



CHAPTER XXI.

FREDA BREAKS SILENCE.

HALF an hour later we were sitting at a pleasant meal, and I was only sorry not to be hungrier, for the Magnolia Cottage of my imagination could not have provided more inviting viands than the cold fowl, and rolls and butter, and honey and fragrant coffee, which made our lunch. Freda flushed with pleasure when I said so.

“Ah!” she said, looking towards her friend, “if anybody can make a shilling go as far as a pound, it is Mary Vincent.”

“Hardly that, my dear, but I am not an old campaigner for nothing, and the advantage of living in a slum is, that food is sold at prices within reach of the poor. Then I spent a couple of years of my girlhood in a French convent, and learned from Sister St. Geneviève to make coffee,” said Freda’s friend.

I liked Mrs. Vincent uncommonly well. She was quite plain-looking, but had, I thought, one of the sweetest expressions imaginable. Her hair, too, was very pretty, white, and with a wave in it, a striking contrast to

her olive-hued cheeks and quick, brown eyes. But looking at her one only got an impression of the goodness of the face; the irregular features and small eyes and colourless skin faded into insignificance as compared with that.

Master Jacky, too, had his chair at the table, beside Mrs. Vincent. I must say he behaved very well for so small a boy, and one evidently so much petted. Except for an occasional indiscretion, such as asking why wasn't there chicken and honey every day, his conduct was exemplary. Indeed, with regard to her training of him it was evident that Mrs. Vincent had not been a soldier's wife for nothing. She had a number of military words of command, which she uttered with an immovable face whenever the young gentleman seemed on the point of becoming obstreperous. It amused me very much to see the boy's prompt obedience to them; but that was, as she explained to me, because Jacky was to be a soldier when he grew up, and he had already begun his training.

I couldn't help thinking that she was probably better for the young pickle than his own dear little mother, whose eyes danced and twinkled with such merriment when Jacky forgot that he was a soldier acting under orders. Mrs. Vincent's face never lost its sweet seriousness for one moment, even when Freda and I were visibly merry.

After lunch Mrs. Vincent carried the boy off and left us to our chat. There were so many things we had yet

to say to each other. After I had told all the home news I came back to Freda herself.

"Now tell me," I asked, "what a 'nasty place' is like, such as your last 'place'?"

I made a wry face over the word, which seeing, Freda laughed.

"Well, I'll tell you, dear," she said. "In taking my last place, which was to be for a short time, I thought I'd depart from the beaten path of governessing, which is really a very sad and lonely life. So I answered an advertisement for a lady to act as hostess at a Bayswater boarding-house, to take the head of the table, receive people who came on business, and all that kind of thing. The salary was miserable, but the place sounded an easy one, and there was one great inducement. I could have Jacky to stay with me whenever I liked, and oh, my dear, if you could know the pangs of loneliness I have suffered for want of my boy at times! The thought of a 'place' where Mary could fetch him to me now and again for a few hours was like heaven."

"Poor Freda!"

"Oh, poor Freda indeed! You shall hear how it turned out. I found the woman a coarse, red-faced, cunning-eyed person, not at all more prepossessing because of her oily smile. I took a dislike to her at once, though she meant to be very amiable. She said that her business was so large that she could no longer carry out all the duties of hostess herself,—she required another 'lydy' to help her. The real truth was that she was

conscious of her own deficiencies, and had come to see that she lost clients by receiving them herself. She really did want a lady to coax people to come in."

"She must have had common-sense anyhow," said I.

"Oh, my dear, she knew well! She wasn't sensitive, even with regard to herself. She told me that my duties would be, besides presiding at table, receiving visitors, &c., to do such small household tasks as a lady would naturally do in her own house. She hoped, she said, that I wouldn't mind doing a little mending."

"Well?"

"Well, I said I didn't mind anything in reason. Then she took me upstairs and showed me my bedroom. It was the merest attic, but I could see a tree or two from it, and at the foot of my bed there was a little old cot, which clinched the matter for me, for I imagined Jacky in it, and the joy of undressing and dressing him myself, and listening to his soft breathing all night. So I said I'd come, without further ado."

"Is it so seldom you have Jacky to yourself, Freda?"

"Well, you see, Hilda, Mary Vincent has been like his mother so long that when I come home I don't like to disturb the existing order of things. She, dear woman, would utterly efface herself if she had the least suspicion of my longing to do everything for Jacky once in a while. But when I come home she thinks I need rest, and am to be waited upon, and will have me lie in bed in the morning while she does everything for both of us."

She sighed a little wistful sigh, and then smiled.

"But I always say to myself that I am Jacky's mother, and that is enough happiness for me. I can yield the rest to her who loves him so much also, and has never had a child of her own. It is so long since I have had things to do for Jacky that I daresay I should be awkward and unaccustomed now."

"Poor Freda!" I said again.

"And rich Freda," she laughed. "I will confess to you, Hilda, that I got over my first great pang when I let my friend bathe Jacky while he was yet a baby. That was—"

She broke off abruptly, and I knew she had been going to say "after Jim died", and then had choked over it.

"She had been so good to us—to me and Jim—that when I saw she was hungry for the child, I stood aside. She never guessed that it cost me anything, dear soul! I cannot understand now how mothers give up the personal care of their babies to anyone else if they can help it. In that way, at least, rich women are not so happy as poor women."

"But the boarding-house, Freda?" I said.

"Ah, yes! I was forgetting. The money was very small, but having Jacky whenever I wished, as the woman said I might, outweighed everything, so I went. Mary thought, too, that the duties, being light, would not wear me out, as I have been worn out where there were half-a-dozen energetic children. But I soon found

that I was to be a kind of white slave. I was to be housemaid and housekeeper and hostess all rolled into one. Even at the hour when a servant's duties are over, mine were going on. If Mrs. Tatlow—that was her name—saw me sitting still for a moment she found new work for me. Why, after a hard day I have sat up till two in the morning mending house-linen. There were years of arrears of mending, all waiting for me.”

“Why did you stay when you found what it was like?”

“I couldn't come home at once, because I had been having a long rest, and the money was all spent. And Lady A. had promised to secure me the place I am now going to in Devonshire, so I thought I would stay on, and endure it without complaint for a while. Then the summer came, and there was an unusual demand for rooms, and Mrs. Tatlow came to me one day with her oily smile, and said she had been obliged to take my room for a time, and if I would not mind the inconvenience of sleeping downstairs she thought she could make me very comfortable. I said I shouldn't mind, for I had not then seen the room, and my attic, since the hot weather set in, had been so hot that I thought I couldn't be much worse off. But, oh, Hilda, if you had seen the room! It had no window, but was lit by a grating in the door. It ran under the street. It was dark, noisome, unwholesome in the last degree, for it had only been intended to put brushes and such things in. My wretched little bed almost filled it completely. I protested when

I saw the place, but quite in vain. My own room was already taken."

"And you slept in it, Freda?" I cried out, horrified.

"I could do nothing else. Mary had taken Jacky to Broadstairs—we have always managed to give him a month at the sea every summer. This little house is taken for that period by two maiden ladies, friends of Mary's, who like to come up once a year to see the pictures and shops. I had nowhere to turn to. I sat down in the horrible little hole and cried bitterly. Then I concluded that I could stand it till Mary came home, and so I set my teeth to it."

"The woman ought to have been put in prison," I said angrily.

Freda laughed.

"That is precisely what Susan, the kitchen-maid, said. 'She did ought to be in 'Olloway, that's wot she ought.' Indeed I got plenty of sympathy from the overworked, badly-fed, worse-housed, kitchen staff. I often wondered at the warmth of their partizanship, poor dears. They were worse off, as far as sleeping accommodation went, than myself, though, of course, a servant has always this advantage over an untrained lady, that she can leave. There are so many of *us*," said Freda, with a watery little smile.

"You had some friends, anyhow?" I said.

"Yes; though I wouldn't listen to their sympathy; not so much for my dignity's sake—that sort of thing levels human beings somehow—as that I couldn't bear it at the time."

"You poor darling!" I cried, embracing her.

Again the rainbow smile flitted over her face, and she went on.

"The sympathy that really touched me most came from the ostensible master of the house. Before this time I had only seen Mr. Tatlow flitting along a corridor, or diving into a doorway to get out of my way. He was the most absurd little man to look at—pale-faced, tearful-eyed, with long red weepers of whiskers, and a general miserableness of expression."

"So well he might have," said I acridly. "Well—"

"So well he might, my dear. Susan informed me that he had to clean all the boots, sometimes forty pairs a day, in the season. He was the most oppressed of all his wife's victims."

"Why didn't he assert himself, then?"

"Oh, Hilda, you should have seen him! Poor little soul! He was one of those men who make you feel it to be so tragic that they should be men and yet like that. Coventry Patmore makes his plain heroine talk of the sadness—

"That God should e'er
Make women, and not make them fair".

But the tragedy of men like poor little Mr. Tatlow is sadder still."

"How did he show his sympathy?" I asked.

"Oh, poor little soul! by facing his wife for me with the spirit of a lion. He was miserably afraid of her, yet he did that. And he apologized to me with a delicacy

and good feeling that showed he had the heart of a gentleman in his poor little frame."

"He could do nothing?"

"No, only get himself into hot water by his championship of me. I believe the woman was horribly violent when she was angry. She vented all her violence on him, for though she was savagely angry with me she said nothing. I only knew it by her glance of malevolence when she thought herself unnoticed."

"And you slept a month in that dog-hole?"

"No, I'm ashamed to say I didn't. I'm not made of the martyr-stuff. I had been ten days or so in it when Lucy, the chamber-maid, told Miss Dahlia Warner, an American who was staying in the house, about my habitation. Miss Warner was very rich, very pretty, and very spirited. She came down and saw the place for herself. 'Now, why did you do it, Mrs. Hazeldine?' she asked; 'don't you know it was self-murder? Look at yourself in the glass!' I did so, and saw a very white face and very big eyes. 'Besides, you are encouraging that wretch to treat some other helpless, poor creature in just the same way.'

"Then I burst out crying, and she suddenly put her arms about me affectionately. 'There, I am worrying you, you poor little thing!' she cried; 'as if you had not had enough to bear already. Come up to my room and tell me all about it. The woman is out, but if she were not, she wouldn't dare to question me.'"

So I went with her, and, being broken down by her

sympathy, I told her everything. When I had finished, she said to me, 'There! Can you get your things together in a quarter of an hour? Yes, I am sure you can, for that kind creature downstairs will help you. You are coming with me to the Cecil as my guest for a fortnight, and as long afterwards as you will stay.'

And so she carried me off. She returned later on for her own luggage, paid Mrs. Tatlow for her board, and gave that good lady a stinging little bit of her mind. The woman was obsequious to her, for her main business is with Americans, and she dreaded the mischief Miss Warner might do her. But for all that she kept my pretty things."

"Your pretty things, Freda?"

"Yes. She came here on some excuse after I had promised to go to her, and saw my pretty things, my bits of ivory and silver and lacquer that used to be in our little home at Oodeypore. No matter how poor I was, I would never part with them. She insisted on my bringing them with me to decorate her drawing-room, and now she holds them in default of the warning she says I ought to have given her."

"But she can't keep them, surely?"

"Oh no! she will give them up. It is only what Miss Warner calls a game of bluff. That good friend was recalled suddenly to America, and since I would not go with her, as she wanted, she put me and my affairs in charge of her betrothed, who is a young solicitor in an old firm in Chancery Lane. He, Mr. Douglas, says that

Mrs. Tatlow is only squirming a little before giving up the things. So we shall let her squirm."

"And now," Freda said, "let us have some tea, for I seem to have been talking an incredible amount."

When she had ordered the tea, I said to her:

"Is Aline to hear this, Freda?"

"I think not," she said wistfully, "unless you think that I had better own up to everything. But it would only grieve her."

"Indeed, I think you are right," I said. "It would nearly break her heart. I think you were cruel to us too, Freda, to endure such things."

"Well, it was not for very long," she answered.

"I hope that 'place' was quite exceptional," I said, again mouthing the distasteful word, and with a severe aspect.

"Oh, quite! There aren't many Mrs. Tatlows in this world. By the way, Hilda, since the mood for confession is upon me, I may as well own up something else."

"What! more boarding-houses?" I cried.

"Oh, no! I am done with boarding-houses. But what will you say when I tell you that I have been lady's-maid to Lady A."

"A real lady's-maid! Not a sort of lady lady's-maid?" I exclaimed, rather horrified.

"I thought you would be shocked. Yet it was the pleasantest work I have ever had. She is very beautiful, and, in her odd, flighty way, very kind. I used to love doing her long ashy-coloured hair. It was down to her

feet when I used to brush it out at night. I often brushed it till I could scarcely stand, for the pleasure of handling it."

"You were not like an ordinary servant, Freda, surely?"

"Oh, no! though I was prepared to accept that when I went to Overton Towers. But I found a little room allotted to me close by Lady A.'s own rooms, and she had given orders that I was to have my meals there. So I was not with the other servants, and when I wasn't on duty I could read or write, or do anything I liked in my own little room."

"How long did you stay, Freda?"

"Well, not many months. Her ladyship said to me suddenly one day, when I met her eyes in the mirror: 'I should like to know, my dear, why you are masquerading as my maid'."

"What did you say?"

"I answered her quite frankly. 'Because I'm a poor woman, Lady A., and I find the genteel professions too hard for me.' 'Well,' she said, 'you are everything I could desire as a maid, but I'm going to do better for you than leave you at the mercy of a heartless woman of fashion like myself, and in a perfectly anomalous position. Besides, you make me look a hag beside you. I shudder when I see your face near mine in the glass. I'm taking back Cecile, an unscrupulous wretch, but an admirable maid, for I'm more comfortable with her. And I'm going to send you to Mrs. Des Vœux, an ex-

quisite old blind lady in Devonshire, for whom you will read and write and cut roses—that's all. I've kept you so long to make sure you'd be good to her. And now I am sure.'"

"She arranged it for you like that?"

"Yes, just like that. I was to have gone to Mrs. Des Vœux in a short time after I left Lady A., so I came home and imprudently spent all my money. Then it happened that the lady whom I was to replace, whose marriage was leaving the vacancy for me, had to postpone her departure for six months. So I was rather thrown on my beam-ends, and that is how I had the pleasure of making Mrs. Tatlow's acquaintance."

"And I suppose Mrs. Des Vœux's will be a case of 'and they lived happy ever afterwards'?"

Freda gave a little shudder.

"Oh, no, Hilda! I hope I shall have a house of my own one day, though I don't see how it's going to happen. Servitude is all very well so long as one is young, but—" she ended with an expressive little gesture, flinging out both her hands.

"Freda," said I impulsively, "have you ever had an offer of marriage in those years of your wanderings?"

"An embarrassment, Hilda. My suitors have ranged in age from sixteen to sixty—nay, seventy-five—and in eligibility from the ownership of a pocket-knife and three white mice to the ownership of an iron-foundry and a steam yacht."

"And you never met anyone you could say 'yes' to?"

Freda's merry face changed all at once, and a wounded red flew into her soft, pale cheeks.

"You are only a child, Hilda," she said coldly, "and so I forgive you."

"Oh, Freda," I cried, "I didn't think you'd care so much!"

"I am Jim's wife," she answered, "as well as Jim's widow!"





CHAPTER XXII.

BOOKS AND SOLDIERS.

THE day after I saw Freda I went with General MacNeill to call on his friend, Mr. Linklater. I can tell you my heart beat as we went in through the narrow nest of streets that make the publishing quarter, and I saw names on the street corners that told me we were in the heart of my Mecca. Paternoster Row, Ave Maria Lane, Amen Corner,—I whispered the names to myself as softly as though I were a votary.

We went through a narrow passage into a kind of shop on the first-floor of a tall house, but no one was buying or selling. Only a clerk sat at a desk, with a pen behind his ear, amid walls of books in bundles of brown paper, or standing in piles in their outer wrappings.

"Mr. Linklater, sir?" he said in answer to the General; "I will see if he is in. Will you and the lady step in here?"

We followed him into a stuffy room, ventilated only by a window opening on the outer office. The walls of the room were of muffled glass, and when the clerk had switched on the electric light and left us I was free to

walk about and look at the books published by the firm which stood about on tables and shelves. Would mine ever be there, I wondered, as we waited!

The General had taken off his hat and was mopping his brows with his handkerchief while he grumbled at the stuffiness of the place. It was stuffy—but I didn't mind it a bit. I thought I should love to be one of the people whose shadows I could see passing along the glass corridors—to breathe and smell books all day, to see famous authors, and handle proofs.

Presently the clerk returned to us and asked us to follow him. We went up in a comfortable padded lift, which in itself was a delightful experience to me. Then the clerk opened the door, and we stepped out into a long corridor. He knocked at a door which stood a little open, and in answer to a "Come in" he ushered us across the threshold, and left us with a low bow.

A tall, dusty, untidy man came to meet us, and greeted the General very warmly. I stood in the background and looked at him. His reddish-brown hair was sprinkled thickly with gray. He wore a very old coat, the lapels of which bore some traces of tobacco ash. He had a rough grayish-brown beard and bright shrewd hazel eyes. He seemed as if he were always running his hands through his hair in desperation, and as if he had slept in his clothes.

So much I noticed while the old friends were greeting each other. Then the two turned to me.

"And so this is the author of *Love in the Valley!*" said

the great publisher in a singularly musical voice. "Upon my word, I could not have believed it was such young work, General."

"Ah! Miss Brandon is very old for her age," replied the General, highly delighted at the implied compliment to the book. "You've been reading it, Linklater?"

We had sent in the manuscript before leaving home.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Linklater, still looking at me very kindly; "I've dipped into the early chapters. I think well of it, very well, for a first book. It isn't a *Jane Eyre*, you know, nor a *Wuthering Heights*. Still, 'tis pleasant reading, and very hopeful."

"That's all we wanted you to say," said the General, a bit testily. "We're not fools about our first book, are we, Hilda?"

"Indeed," said I truthfully, "Mr. Linklater's verdict is far kinder than I had dared to hope for."

The publisher looked away from me as if the subject were done with.

"And how are pheasants in your part of the world, MacNeill?"

"Not much, Linklater. Poaching has been rampant for years. There's no such system of fat and comfortable preserving as you have here; and then the heavy rains kill off the young birds, all but the strongest."

"Ah! that's bad, that's bad. Any blackcock?"

"The mountains simply swarm with every kind of game, from deer to snipe. But nothing's been taken care of. My place has been derelict for years. I'll put in a

couple of keepers, and next year you must come and judge for yourself, if God spares us all."

"Why shouldn't He?" said the publisher hastily.

"Ah! Linklater, you're a young man still, while I've turned sixty. And life is uncertain to the youngest of us."

"So it is, so it is!" said the publisher, as if the question had no interest for him. "I hear you've good trout rivers over there."

"The best in Europe," said the General heartily. "My cook will send you up a salmon-trout if you'll come over next May or June—off your own rod, too—that you'll never forget as long as you live."

"You were always a lucky dog!" said the publisher enviously. "I suppose there's no man alive hates the smell of printer's ink more than I do, and yet here I am, condemned to it all my life, while you've been living the life of a man, fighting half the time, and now sitting down to enjoy your elder years in a half-wild country flowing with milk and honey."

"You are shocking this child, Linklater," said the General, and indeed I had heard him in amazement. "Miss Brandon thinks Paternoster Row the centre of the universe."

The publisher looked at me kindly.

"So did I when I was her age, or I shouldn't be where I am now."

"Hear him!" said the General. "Who would think the man was one of the finest scholars alive?"

"Grubbing among the bones of dead men."

"My lad told me that when he was at Oxford you were still remembered as the Bodleian Bookworm."

"I had less complimentary names than that. I was an idle dog in those days, or at least learnt nothing that could bring me honours. I read at my own sweet will, and came out badly in the Schools, though better than I deserved. I was really the idlest man of my time, except Fennings of New, who lay all day in a hammock with a pack of cards, and played the right hand against the left when he could no longer get anyone to play with him. He afterwards became a great colonial administrator,—"

"And you a scholar, whose scholarship altogether overshadows you as a publisher."

"Well, well, I ought to have been a farmer, and tramped the furrows all day in muddy boots. Books are not living."

"You're an ungrateful fellow!" said the General. "If you were one of the failures, now?"

"Ah!" said the publisher; "everyone knows in his own heart how much he has failed or succeeded. But here is Miss Brandon, a beginner still at the cross-roads, and with the will yet hers to choose which she will take. You're not afraid of hard work, Miss Brandon?"

"Not a bit," I answered fervently.

"You can bear having your things rejected by stupid editors and publishers, while they publish work you feel to be infinitely less good? You can bear to see popularity pass you by, on its way to writers whose work you think beneath your contempt? You can bear to see your books published and forgotten, as utterly as a stone

is forgotten that is dropped in the water; and to endure the stupidity and neglect of the critics, as well as of the public?"

"I can bear it all," said I cheerfully.

"Well, then, if you can," said he, with a change of tone, "you will find the roses in your path thicker than the thorns. The work is exquisite for its own sake, and if it is good, and it *will* be good, you will have a little audience that will love you and it. You will never write a word to fall on deaf ears. You will find even a few critics to believe in you, and say so. And you will gain the most unselfish friendship. I have heard of envy and malice in literature, but I have never yet discovered them."

"Ah! there speaks the cynic," said the General; "and yet you would tramp the furrows and depend on the weather?"

"I would plant cabbages against the rainy time, so that if my oats were rotting my vegetables would be waxing fat. The weather is a good or a bad fellow according as you take him."

"Well, Linklater, we're taking up too much of your valuable time."

"I'm the idlest man in London this minute."

'Well, if you are, come and lunch with us at the Cecil."

"Ah! but others are not so idle as I. I have a good many people to see before lunch time. By the way, we must meet again. Suppose you dine with me one evening? I want to hear a good many things about yourself."

As we went out Mr. Linklater drew the General aside, and said something to him in a low voice. I guessed at its purport, for the General shook his head very sadly in answer.

"Ah, well!" said the publisher; "I wouldn't give up hope, man. Lance was always a fellow of so much resource, and again and again men have returned after being given up for lost, as he has been."

"And many have not returned," said the General. "But thank you, Linklater, for your sympathy all the same."

"We are both lonely men," said the publisher. "But you have yet hope."

"And you have certainty," said the General, looking up and lifting his hat. "I have often wished I could have as much."

"Ah! that is where you religious men score."

"Yes," said the General simply; "I do not know where my boy is, but there is One that knows."

The two men shook hands in silence. Then the publisher turned to me with his kind smile.

"We shall make you formal publishing proposals in a day or two, Miss Brandon. It would never do to arrange such matters during a morning call."

After we had gone out in the street the General told me that Mr. Linklater had lost his wife and daughter by scarlet fever a few years previously.

"Poor fellow! poor fellow!" he said; "he looks as if he wanted a woman's hand about him. You would hardly

believe, Hilda, that I remember him as one of the golden youth?"

"I don't think the carelessness of his attire misbecomes him," I said.

"Ah! it has a sad look to me, remembering him so far otherwise."

"I always supposed that all scholars were rather dusty. Books are such dusty things."

"Linklater was the exception. His wife was a lovely, soft creature, and devoted to him. And the little red-haired girl was a thing of such light and colour that she seemed more like a bird or a flower than a human creature. It is hard to imagine Death stilling all that wild and gracious life."

"Or fixing it for ever."

"True, my child. He carries the elixir of life if we would only see it. But now, how are you pleased about your own affairs?"

"Oh, dear General, how could I be anything but pleased? And I owe it all to you. What a blessed, blessed day it was that brought you to Rose Hill!"

"It was blessed for me. I have often since thought it so strange that we should have been brought together, you having known my boy."

I said nothing in answer to this, but as we were in a hansom I just pressed my old friend's hand to assure him of my sympathy. Then to distract his mind I told him about Freda, and how I had got to the root of her mystery. He was greatly interested.

"She must be a brave creature," he said, "though I think her foolish to have kept you all in the dark. But young people are romantic, and will take views, especially in the matter of self-sacrifice, that we sadder and older ones cannot share. And there was no wilful deception; the thing seems to have grown up of itself. But don't you feel happier, now that your golden castles for her are all in ruins?"

"I feel as if my sister had been given back to me," I said, "and if I'm not mistaken, Aline will feel just the same way."

"Ah, that's right! Better to have her heart in the right place than to have her a rich woman, eh?"

"Much better."

"I fancy I knew Mrs. Vincent at one time," he said musingly. "At least I remember meeting the wife of an excellent soldier and good comrade, Ned Vincent, of the Frontier Rifles. I heard he died of fever up-country. I wonder if it could be the same!"

"I am sure it is," said I, "for Mrs. Vincent always speaks of 'Ned'."

"I had no idea he left his widow poor. Something ought to be done for her if she is Ned Vincent's widow. I wonder if I have enough influence at the War Office to try!"

"You had better make sure about her first. Supposing we go to-morrow? I'll send a card to Freda to-night."

The thing was agreed upon, and the General and I drove down to Magnolia Cottage next day. The General

had gone out in the morning on a mysterious business, and several brown-paper parcels of odd shapes had been left afterwards by quickly-arriving errand-boys. I didn't ask what the things were, but I guessed pretty accurately without the assistance of Miss MacNeill's indiscretion.

She had accompanied us to the hall-door, and noticed the General, with a pretence of there being no secrecy about the matter, carrying his parcels to the hansom.

"Now whatever have you got there?" she blurted. "Not a toy drum, surely. You're not going back to your second childhood, Hugh?"

"Madam," said the General in his angriest voice, "folly and meddlesomeness are not confined to any age, as you've the best right in all the world to know."

And he stalked away from the gibe I saw trembling on Miss Lucy's lips.

When we were seated and packed round about with very angular parcels, he explained to me apologetically that he had taken the liberty of bringing some toys for the little soldier.

"Your sister won't mind, my dear," he said. "She will forgive an old man who once had a little soldier of his own."

"She will think it very kind," I assured him, and indeed those toys were a passport for the General to the hearts of the two women who loved Jacky more than all the world.

Mrs. Vincent proved to be the widow of the General's old friend, and as they seemed to have a thousand things

to talk of, Freda and I left them together while we made Jacky's toilet. It had been made earlier in the day, but he had undone it all by falling into the bath while giving his puppy, Captain, a bath in honour of the brave soldier man they were both going to be introduced to.

Jacky certainly looked very smart when we had got him into a fresh white sailor suit, and with his hair more curly than ever after his cold-water dip, presented him to the General. Jacky immediately stood "at attention", with his finger to his curls as a military salute.

"Why, come here, my brave lad, and see whether the young soldier can learn anything from the old soldier!" cried the General, beaming; and a few seconds later Jacky was perched on his knee, showing him his good-conduct stripes, and explaining that at the end of the year, if his conduct was all that could be desired, he was to receive a medal.

"Where are *your* medals, old soldier?" Jacky cried. "And why don't you wear them on your tunic as I shall?"

The general explained to him that custom required the grown-up soldier to dress like an ordinary citizen at times, and then he described, with the utmost painstaking, so that a little child might understand, the various medals he had, and the battles for which they were given.

Freda and Mrs. Vincent were as much absorbed as Jacky. I enjoyed it from an outsider's point of view, thinking how pretty it was—the old man with the child's heart bringing down his years to the level of the child's,

and the two women with their pleasure and pride in it all.

Presently, when they were quite old friends, for the friendship advanced by strides, the General's gifts were offered, and received with such shrieks of delight on Jacky's part that I was fain to clap my hands to my ears.

When we left, Jacky played us out, marching backwards and forwards as he had seen the Highland pipers do in the streets, girt with sword and drum, and with a shrill fife at his lips, so that all Grove Avenue turned out to see.

"A brave little chap!" the General pronounced him; and as we drove away he leaned from the hansom to look back at him. I thought he looked sad. He was thinking of his own soldier boy, I made sure.

We had very gay times after that, and on several occasions the General took Jacky with us on our expeditions, bearing with the child so patiently and sweetly that I thought no mother could have done more. Not that Jacky didn't behave admirably. He had an immense admiration for "Old Soldier" as he called him; but then a lively boy of six is apt to prove a handful to a veteran with a gun-shot wound in the leg, and to a slightly-limping girl.

We saw the Tower, and Hampton Court, and Windsor Castle, and the exhibition at Earl's Court, and the wax-works at Madame Tussaud's, and the Crystal Palace, all with Jacky to bear us company.

Then the General and I saw one or two theatres, and one evening we dined with Mr. Linklater, and it was all very pleasant. But by the time our little holiday was up I was beginning to feel rather fagged, and to wish for Brandon and the library at Rose Hill.

The very last morning we were in London came the publishing proposal from Messrs. Linklater, Lee, and Warner, with a stamped agreement for me to sign, which I did, feeling it the proudest moment of my life. The book was to come out before Christmas, and the proposal seemed to me a very handsome one, for I should have been overjoyed to get the book published without any suggestion of being paid for it.

However, as the General said, that wouldn't be business, or at least business as an honourable firm like Linklater, Lee, and Warner understood it.

I couldn't send back the agreement till I had taken it home for Aline and Esther and the boys to see, not even if it delayed the book, but the General said he thought there would be no fear of that.

And now that I had to look forward to such happy things—the book, and the reviews, and all that—I longed for the time to pass till the published book should be an accomplished fact, and Hilda Brandon the name of a real author.



CHAPTER XXIII.

ESTHER.

I WAS welcomed at Brandon as rapturously as if I had come out of a long exile, and delightful it was to see the dear faces after even a short absence. It seemed to me as if I had been ages away, and I was rather surprised that the ducklings which had come out just before I left appeared much the same black-eyed balls of yellow fluff, and that the year had advanced so little during my memorable eight days of absence.

I had so much to tell them that though I had travelled all night I did not feel inclined to go to bed. I spent the morning over my unpacking and distributing the little gifts I had brought for each one. I kept till the afternoon,—when the young ones should have dispersed and left me with Aline,—the wonderful discovery I had made about Freda.

Well, Aline didn't know whether to cry or be vexed or glad over the knowledge that our Freda—about whom we had built so many golden dreams—was after all in the ranks of the workers. Yet I think, on the whole, the relief of knowing that she was the same dear, generous girl, only empty-handed now, outweighed all the rest.

Then my stories about Magnolia Cottage and Mrs. Vincent and Jacky were so pleasant that Aline, after a bit, grew reconciled to Freda's change of fortune. I gave her an imploring little note which Freda had intrusted me with, asking her to forgive the deception, which was never seriously meant, and had somehow grown up of itself. The humility of it brought the tears into Aline's eyes.

"I will write to her at once, dear girl," she said, going to her writing-table.

As she looked for a pen a sound caught our ears.

"Ah," she said, "it is Esther! We have not seen her all the week. Entertain them, dear Hilda, while I scribble a few words."

But when I went downstairs I found the pony and phaeton with Dobson, and a note from Lady O'Brien, saying that Esther had a sick headache and was being kept in bed, but longed to see me; and would I drive over and stay for dinner, or the night if I would?

"Yes, go," said Aline, "but you had better stay the night, dear. It would be too much to drive back here after your journey last night."

So I put one or two necessary things into a hand-bag, and drove off to Annagower.

When I went into the drawing-room I found Lady O'Brien alone, but no Esther.

"Your sister is asleep, Hilda," she said; "and I won't waken her, for I want a good long chat with you. Just take off your hat and cloak and come to the fire, and

we'll have tea in, and be comfortable. Have you a pair of slippers in your bag? Well, just put them on,—don't mind going upstairs. You look rather fagged already."

I found the low chair and the footstool before the fire very comfortable indeed, for I was tired, but by no means sleepy. I felt that Lady O'Brien wanted to say something, and feeling sure that it was about Esther's trouble, I was too interested to be sleepy.

When we had each our cup of tea in our hands, and the fat page-boy had gone out, closing the door behind him, Lady O'Brien opened the matter which I had seen all the time trembling on her lips.

"Your sister has told me everything, child."

"Ah!" said I. "I wished she would. Has anything new happened?"

"Nothing; but Esther is in trouble. We have heard nothing of young De Lacy, though I have written twice to ask him to come."

"That is curious."

"It is, because the boy is a gentleman, and because he is head over ears in love with your sister. I have seen that all along, but I pick the locks of no confidences. I knew that presently my dear girl would tell me of her own accord."

"He may be ill."

"That is what she says. She keeps saying over and over that she can never undo the silence of the last few months, during which he may have been ill and dying. She has fretted herself into a fever."

"I am afraid he is not very strong."

"He is not strong enough for ill-usage. He would be all right in the life he was brought up to. I'm afraid Rivers was right when he was anxious about the boy leaving Brandon. Where there is internal injury it is so hard to know whether healing or hurt is going on."

"What are we to do, Lady O'Brien?"

"That's what I wanted to consult you about. You have a clear head and a still tongue. Of one thing I am certain. My girl is not going to have her tender heart broken if I can help it, the Lord helping me."

She got up and paced about the room, all her little frame tense with a nervous energy I had not suspected in her.

"You think it has gone deep with Esther, Lady O'Brien?"

"What do you think, you who have been her dearest companion from babyhood?"

"I think it is once and for ever."

"I am sure of it. She is very innocent and very romantic. She feels that she has been waiting for him all those years, and about him all the dreams and the poetry of her innocent and ardent heart have gathered."

"You know as much of her as I do, whose dearer self she has been all our lives."

The old lady nodded a queer, triumphant little nod.

"Ah, Hilda!" she said, "love is a wonderful teacher, and I love her like my own child. I would do everything within the law of God to make her happy."

"You don't think it hopeless?"

Lady O'Brien snapped her fingers.

"Hopeless! I see no obstacle that other people can raise. The only obstacle I would acknowledge would be the lad's coldness or unworthiness or—"

She broke off abruptly.

"Or death," I said for her.

"That is in the hands of God," she replied, "but I pray that He may will this girl, the joy of my old age, to be happy."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Propose, child? Well, first we have to find out what's the matter with the boy. I've written to Sir Rupert."

"What?" I cried.

"Written to his old villain of a grandfather, who, I expect, is at the bottom of the mischief. I sent a boy with it on one of your wild mountain ponies. He ought to be nearly back by this time."

"You didn't tell him—"

"I merely asked for an interview. I had thought of driving over there, but I was afraid the rapscllion would bar his gates against me."

"The country people would tell you it wasn't safe."

"Pooh! What a mass of superstition has grown up about the place! Just because it stands in a dark spot and is surrounded by unwholesome weeds. Why, if I could have hoped to get past the gates, I'd have gone like a shot. Dobson would come and fetch me out after a

certain time. He's as brave as a lion, though you wouldn't believe it."

"There are those horrible dogs."

"Poor, lumbering, unhappy brutes! I should never be afraid of them."

"All the same, I'm glad you didn't go, you intrepid little fairy godmother."

"You'll see that I can be intrepid where it's a question of fighting for my girl's happiness."

"Sir Rupert will never consent to the marriage, Lady O'Brien."

"A fig for the man's consent! I only want to find out where the boy is. If he cuts up rusty I'll tell him to go and be hanged. I've a roof to cover them, and enough for a young couple to live on, even with the old woman in the chimney-corner."

"How good you are, Lady O'Brien! No wonder Esther loves you."

"It is she who is good to come here and brighten my old life with her youth and freshness."

"You are very young in heart," I could not help saying.

"Ah! my dear, perhaps I keep my heart a little green. I remember when I was young myself—long before ever I thought of my good Peter—and how I loved somebody, and thought I should die of losing him."

"But why did you lose him?" I whispered.

"He never thought of me, my dear, not in that way. He never even suspected that I thought of him."

I looked at her in wondering sympathy.

"It was your grandfather, Hilda," she said. "He's a saint in heaven to-day, dear fellow, but, upon my word, I half wish he'd been less saintly, and had called out De Lacy and put a bullet through him."

The transition was so sudden and characteristic that I burst out laughing. Just then the page-boy came to the door.

"Your ladyship's messenger has returned and brought a note."

Lady O'Brien snatched the note from the salver.

"There, that will do. Never mind the fire. We'll attend to it ourselves. Go out, and shut the door after you."

She tore open the note, glanced at it, and then handed it to me. It was written on a half-sheet of paper, evidently torn from a letter, and with ink so pale as to suggest an application of water to the ink-pot.

Sir Rupert De Lacy presents his compliments to Lady O'Brien, and will do himself the honour of calling on her to-morrow at five.

"Now, that's the letter of an ordinary human being," said Lady O'Brien, "barring an eccentricity in the ink and paper. Maybe the devil's not so black as he's painted."

"It's very polite," said I, "but I wouldn't trust him. I'd distrust him all the more when he was by way of being civil."

"Well, we'll see, we'll see. It won't be long till to-morrow at five."

"I'll wait and hear what he has to say," I said.

"I'll tell you what. I'd better see him alone. But if you'd care to be present at the interview you can just sit inside the alcove there and pull the reed curtains. He'll never see your black frock in the dark, and if he does, why, it's no business of his."

"Esther is not to know, I suppose."

"Better not. It would only agitate her. Wait till it is over. Perhaps she is awake now and longing to see you."

She rang the bell and asked if Miss Brandon was awake, and the reply was in the affirmative, so I went upstairs to Esther's pretty room.

The dusk was beginning to gather, but I could see that she looked ill, though she had a bright colour. Her eyes were heavy and her aspect listless.

"I'm afraid I'm in for a feverish cold, Hilda," she said, when we had greeted each other. "My throat is sore and my hands very hot. Feel them."

I took her hands in mine and felt them dry and burning.

"What is it, Essie?" I said tenderly; "worry?"

"Not altogether that. The day before yesterday, when my godmother had driven to Iniscrone on business, and I was supposed to be nursing a little cold I brought from Kilkee, I slipped out and ran all the way to Brandon Abbey, thinking there might be a word or a flower for me in the old place. But there was nothing, and it rained hard coming back, and I got very wet, and said nothing about it."

"Oh, Esther, that was foolish!"

"I know; but you don't know how I am driven to do something. It seems as if I was lying here and letting all my life slip through my fingers."

"Can't you trust other people to do for you just for the present?"

"Ah! my godmother has been talking to you. You know I have told her everything."

"Yes, I am glad of it. She is a stout friend, although only a frail little old fairy godmother. Trust her, Esther. She will do all that love and courage can."

"I know. She is wonderful. But what are we against Sir Rupert? If we had only a man with us! If Pierce had lived and been strong!"

"God's in his heaven, Esther."

"Yes, I try to pray and have faith, but I am afraid of the Cross. What if it were His will to take my Harry?"

"He would give you courage, and would bear your Cross with you. But His will for you may be just as well your heart's desire."

"Yes. I went into a church one day at Kilkee. The door was open, and someone was singing at the organ:

‘O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him,
And He will give thee thy heart's desire’.

I thought it was a message for me, and have said it so often to myself. Oh, my heart's desire, my heart's desire!" she cried, and then covered her face with her hands.

"Why are you so full of fears, Esther?" I asked.

"My Harry is delicate," she whispered, "and Sir Rupert is wicked and strong."

"God is stronger than Sir Rupert."

"Oh, Hilda, can you imagine the unnaturalness of the man that makes him hate his own flesh and blood? No one knows how much my Harry has been made to suffer in that house. He says it is his grandfather's way of trying to drive him out of it. I wonder if he is right in staying?"

"He has only his own light to go by, as each of us has, Essie. We must leave him to its guidance."

"He says his presence is in some sort a check on the orgies of those two wretched men. But if he dies under it? Has he no duty to me and to his own life?"

"You exaggerate, darling, I am sure. One need not die even of such an unholy place as Angry."

"Not if one were strong. But he has never yet recovered of his hurt, and he is not likely to at Castle Angry."

She broke off suddenly and began to cry.

"I am forgetting that for four months I have had no word of him, and that now the letters that ought to have brought him so eagerly to my side remain unanswered. Where is he, Hilda? Where? How do I know but that he is already dead, and so escaped his enemies? If he were living and well he would surely have come."

"Bé quiet, darling. You are letting your fear run wild. People are not made away with like that in the

nineteenth century. Perhaps the letters have not reached him. Perhaps they have been kept from him, or he is not there. He may have sickened of Angry and gone back to Warwickshire."

"No, he might have gone, but he would have returned. He would not stay long away from where I am."

She lifted her head for a moment in proud confidence. Then it drooped again as a flower droops heavy with rain.

"You would never think, Esther, that he could be silent because he had forgotten you?"

"Never that. Nothing could separate us but death."

"Well, Esther," said I, "be quiet and keep your heart calm. We shall know something to-morrow, for Sir Rupert is to come here at five o'clock."

"Sir Rupert!"

"Yes. We had not meant to tell you, but now I think it is better. Lady O'Brien wrote that she wanted to see him, and he has written saying he will come."

She looked at me with distended eyes.

"Under this roof!" she muttered to herself.

"At least we shall find out where his grandson is."

"Yes, we surely shall. He will have to answer a plain question, won't he, Hilda? To think of the godmother drawing him like that."

"If he had not come she would have invaded him in his den."

"Dear, brave little soul! I have not deserved such love, Hilda."

"For an undeserving person, you seem to receive quite a large share," I said drily.

"Yes, don't I?" she answered in her simple way. Then she went on:

"I am so glad you told me about Sir Rupert, Hilda. It is the doing something that helps me, and I should hardly have had enterprise for that. The penny post has awful possibilities of cruelty. Think of launching those letters into the dark, and then waiting for an answer—the horrible strain of it—and feeling in your cold heart all the time that no answer will come."

"Poor penny post!" I said, laughing; "but think of all the happiness it brings as well!"

"I can only think of the letters that never come, or the cruel and cold letters. But they are easier to bear than the silence."

"Well, darling," I said soothingly, "the cruel and cold letters will never come to you, and the silence is only a pause before good news."

"You think so, Hilda? I was always so afraid of Sir Rupert. I know it is silly, but the shadows out of one's childhood dominate one in a time of trouble."

"Now, fret no more, Essie," I said; "I shall be with you to-night, and to-morrow will bring news. Think of yourself as a rich girl with a lover, and pity all the poor unloved ones like Hilda."

"Ah! time was," she smiled, "in my romantic youth, when I thought the lover stage the one most desirable. Now I think it is cruel and full of fear. But I am going

to be strong, Hilda, and hope for to-morrow. You will tell me everything?"

"Everything; and be sure all will be well."

When I went up to bed that night I found Esther sleeping placidly. The finger-tips were turned towards her palms, like a child's in sleep, and the long lashes made a shadow on her richly-coloured cheeks. I prayed hard that night that the morrow might not betray our confidence.





CHAPTER XXIV.

SIR RUPERT.

THE next day was cold and blustery, with winds that shook down the last remaining glory of the trees, and cold rain that beat the orange and scarlet of the dead leaves into so much black mud. It was a day when everything seems dreary. The big sunflowers in the lawn at Annagower broke with their own weight, and hung ruefully on the shattered stalk. The chrysanthemums were bruised and muddy, and the air was full of the repining of the afflicted branches. Even the robin sang as if his heart were not in it.

I sat with Esther a great part of the morning, and would not let her talk too much on the subject that was in all our minds. I tried to distract her by telling her the things that had happened when I was in London; but though she was interested about Freda, and unselfishly rejoiced over my success with the publishers, yet I could see that her mind wandered, that her fingers beat the counterpane impatiently as though the time would never pass.

But the hours turned round at last to five o'clock, and

found me hidden like a conspirator in the little alcove off the drawing-room. This was unlighted; it was little more than an archway in fact, with a few feet of space behind, but with the dusk in it and the lit drawing-room beyond I had no fear that even Sir Rupert's unflinching old eyes, as I remembered them, would discover me.

I had placed Lady O'Brien with her back to me and the tea-table before her, and had drawn a chair near the lamplight for Sir Rupert, for I had a great desire to see our old enemy's face during the interview that was to be so momentous to poor Essie.

I had not long to wait, for he was punctual to his time. He came in, a curious figure for a lady's drawing-room, in a great rough old frieze coat such as the farmers wear at the fairs. As he sat down heavily in the chair I had placed for him I saw that he looked older, but scarcely weaker than I remembered him. If a tithe of the stories told about his way of life were true, then he had a constitution of iron.

I saw the gleam of his eyes fixed on my lady's face, and felt that I was going to watch a game of fence. In the heat of the room his coat began to steam, and Lady O'Brien implored him to take it off. He did so, flinging it across a velvet chair, and showed himself clad in a riding suit of very ancient cut, in which, however, he looked a figure of a certain distinction. Then he sat down again and leant towards his hostess, bringing his strong, colourless, old face, with its jaws of iron, within the rays of the lamp.

Lady O'Brien had dressed herself for the interview with a certain coquettishness. Dear old lady, it would indeed be the end of things with her when her pretty vanities were relinquished. She was wearing a gray, stiff silk, trimmed with the most exquisite old yellow lace, and her soft hair was piled high over her delicate face with its sparkling eyes.

I could not see her face, of course, from where I sat, but I could see the flash and glitter of her rings as her still-beautiful hands moved to and fro among the tea-cups.

"I may offer you some tea, Sir Rupert?" I heard her say.

"Well, madam, tea is not much in my line," he answered grimly. "It is a good many years since I have known the taste of it, in fact."

"Oh, Sir Rupert, you men!" said the little old lady, lifting a reproving finger; "it is well for you I know your ways."

She took from a lower tray of her tea-table a little bottle gold-coloured, and a liqueur glass.

"This is the finest old brandy, Sir Rupert," she said. "I won't insult you and it by asking if you will take soda-water with it."

"Brandy is quite good enough for me," he answered. "You were always a woman of a thousand."

"Ah! Sir Rupert, you flatter me," said the old lady, sipping her tea.

"If the truth is flattery," he said, "it is the truth that beauty and wit are seldom found in one garland."

"You have not forgotten your old ways," she said. "Rustication has made you no whit the better."

"Ah!" he said, "when beauty and grace shine on unaccustomed eyes, even the rustic tongue is loosed."

I listened with amazement. I had thought that the Sir Rupert who was a man about town and a pretty fellow ages ago, was quite lost in Sir Rupert the ogre of Angry Castle, the false and vindictive friend, the patient waiter upon vengeance, the sinner stained with so many crimes that it was easy to credit him with all. Yet, grim as he looked, his air now was not saturnine. He seemed to have forgotten for a moment his later years, and turned back to a page of his youth.

He had settled his huge shoulders comfortably in the low chair, and was swallowing glass after glass of the brandy, which apparently did not affect him in the least.

"You will be wondering," said my lady, "why I should have asked for this interview."

She had settled down for serious conversation, having replaced her cup in the tray. I could see the pretty fan with which she had provided herself waving to and fro against the firelight.

"No reason was needed, my lady, except that you had not forgotten me like the rest of the world."

"Was that enough to bring you half-a-dozen miles in drenching rain?"

"Since when have I been afraid of a shower?"

"Oh, Sir Rupert! you know you are a recluse by your own choice. The world would not have forgotten you

if you had not willed to be forgotten. This being so, I did not lightly invade your solitude."

"The wish to meet again and recall old memories had been quite enough."

"Ah!" said her ladyship, "old memories are bitter-sweet; let them rest. But I thank you for coming all this way. I would have found my way to your solitude, but I was assured you barred your gates against all the world."

"Country folks' tales," he said. "But it would be to reverse the natural order of things if you had come. Besides, my house is hardly fit to receive a lady."

"That is why I longed to come."

"Because you had heard strange stories about me and it, eh?" he said shrewdly.

"Perhaps. You are somewhat of an ogre, De Lacy."

"Yes, I let the gobemouches say their say."

"Do you mean that really Castle Angry is like any other old house?"

"You do me too much honour to be interested in it. Castle Angry is perhaps as like any other old house as I am like any other old man."

"Well, you are not at all like any God-fearing kindly old man, carrying peace and honour upon his gray hairs."

Sir Rupert laughed grimly.

"You are right. I'm not the grandfatherly sort. If you've heard half the gossip of the country you're a brave woman to have me in your drawing-room. There

are a good many milestones between this and our last merry meeting."

"I'm not a bit afraid of you, De Lacy," said my lady, still waving her large fan. "Though I know you're a bad lot, still I remember that some good people loved and trusted you once upon a time, so I hope the Lord may yet change your heart."

"Ah, thank you!" said Sir Rupert shortly. I guessed that my lady's reference was to my grandfather, and that it had angered Sir Rupert.

"Well, your reason, madam, for desiring an interview," he said with a slight barring of his strong yellow teeth, "since it is not for the pleasure of my company."

"You have a grandson, Sir Rupert."

"I have, madam."

"A charming youth," said my lady pensively. "I congratulate you upon him!"

"Did you send for me to say so, Lady O'Brien?"

"Of course not, De Lacy. But I have missed him of late."

"He is a fortunate fellow."

"I am fond of young society. He came often, and I was grateful to him. Now he comes no more, and though I have written to him I have had no answer."

"Young men, I have heard, are cavalier nowadays."

"They may be, but I don't think the lad is. Do you know anything of him, De Lacy?"

"Do you think I carry him in my pocket, madam?"

"Is he at Angry?"

"If he were, would he not have flown at your call?"

"I feared he might be ill. He is not yet recovered of his hurts when he fell in the spring. I feared he might be at Angry needing a woman's care."

"Your heart is too tender. If he had needed nursing he could have found it where it was supplied to him so generously before. He would naturally turn to my neighbours at Brandon."

"They were very good to him, De Lacy. It was true Christianity of them to take him in. It ought to wipe off old scores in your mind."

His face went livid.

"A new way to pay old debts," he sneered; "but your sex is ever romantic, my lady."

"I am glad the boy is so little like you."

"Little enough as far as that goes, as little as his father was before him. But to what am I indebted for this interest in my flesh and blood?"

"To himself, De Lacy, be sure, and not to you. Partly, too, because he is dear to someone who is dear to me."

"Ah! an affair of the heart. I did not credit him with being a gallant. But I daresay he had a score of pretty affairs I knew nothing of. The county is famed for its rustic beauties, and young men will be young men."

The fan trembled violently in my lady's hand.

"You insult your grandson, sir, and you insult my adopted daughter, to whom he is betrothed."

"Your ladyship's adopted daughter?"

"Miss Esther Brandon."

I leant forward with my heart in my mouth. Sir Rupert had half sprung from his chair, and for a second his attitude was so menacing that I was in the act to rush to the bell-rope. Then he resumed his seat and looked at my lady with narrowed eyes. Something in the look told me that he was answering a defiance in hers. Still her feather fan waved airily up and down.

"The plot thickens," he said at last, and his voice had grown hoarse. "Am I to understand that you contemplate a marriage between this modern Romeo and Juliet? I suppose so, since the affair has flourished under your roof."

"You certainly may understand it, De Lacy. I don't see why your wicked old feuds and hatreds should overshadow two young lives. Let alone that the feud was entirely of your making."

"Do you expect me to abet you?"

"Oh, indeed, I expect little of you, De Lacy, unless the grace of God should soften your heart!"

"Will it alter matters that the youth inherits nothing but the barren acres of Angry? You and—Miss Brandon—are probably thinking of him as the inheritor of my wealth. But my money is my own, and I'd rather leave it to Gaskin to found a family, or endow a home for mangy cats with it."

The fan moved more airily than ever.

"As you will, Sir Rupert. I am a poor woman, but what little I have goes to my dear child."

"She may not be satisfied with that," he said, sneering

viciously. "You probably underestimate her common-sense. And he—he may know on which side his bread is buttered."

"You wrong them both, De Lacy. Love is enough for them."

"A very pretty sentiment in the mouth of an old woman."

The fan fluttered as if the hand that held it were agitated, and I guessed that the rude shaft had gone home.

"It was hardly worth my while to ask you if you were friend or foe," she said after a moment's silence. "I might have known. Do your worst, De Lacy, you cannot hurt them."

"Oh, hurting of the kind you mean is out of fashion! They have my worst wishes. Otherwise, all I desire is to hear no more of the cub who calls himself by my name, and the pauper he has chosen."

"For shame, Sir Rupert! You are unnatural, or you would love the boy and think of nothing but his happiness."

The old man rose from his seat and made an exaggerated bow.

"You are welcome to him," he said, "the poor, pretty, puling fool! I hope the girl has enough manhood for two."

"If he were not a man, De Lacy, he would never have spent an hour in Angry Castle. What are you, to judge of gentleness and chivalry?"

She had stood up now, and, leaning on her stick, shook an angry head at him.

"What have you done with him, De Lacy?" she cried. "I believe you know where he is, and will not say."

"What, then, is Master Milksop to be spirited away like a yearling child?"

"He is not with you, then?" she said, too eager to be baffled by his insults.

"He is not. He left three months ago."

"Three months ago! Why hasn't he written then?"

"How can I say? He has tired of his fancy, I expect."

"That is not true, De Lacy, and you know it is not."

"If he has not, let him come back to her."

Lady O'Brien rang the bell, and in answer the page-boy appeared.

"Show this gentleman out," she said, and stood erect till the door had closed behind the enemy.

The instant he was gone I ran to the window to see him mount his dog-cart and disappear in the wet night. Then I came back to Lady O'Brien's side. She had sunk into her chair, and the sparkle and fire were gone out of her face.

"Ah," she said, drawing a long breath, "if I only had the flogging of that man! And to think how helpless we are, an old woman and two girls, my dear. And time was when twenty fine fellows would have been ready to flog him for me!"

"I suppose he really knows nothing of his grandson?"

"I suppose not. After all, as he says, the boy is not an



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"LADY O'BRIEN STOOD UP NOW AND SHOOK AN ANGRY HEAD
AT HIM."



infant. He must have grown sick of the place and gone away. I know his life there was insupportable, though Sir Rupert never actually showed him the door."

"What are we to say to Esther?"

"That is what is troubling me."

"We hardly know Harry De Lacy. Is it possible he could care less than she does, and knowing his own poverty, and that Sir Rupert would never consent, has given her up and gone away?"

She shook her head.

"Esther would say it was not possible. I only know him through her love. For myself, I saw a handsome and gentle boy, a gentleman, and with the tastes and habits of one. I could say as much for fifty lads of my acquaintance."

"You don't think the gentleness could imply weakness?"

"Ah! that I cannot answer for. Esther will never believe that he could go away and forget her. Ah, my poor child! I dread to tell her that we have heard nothing. If no word of him comes I don't know what she will do."

"There is nothing left for us to do but wait," I said sadly.

"I suppose not," she said, "especially as there was no formal engagement between them. Poor child! if she had trusted me earlier, all this might have been averted. We cannot go out into the world, you and I, Hilda, and track him down."

"No," I assented, "but we will hope. You have done

When she got about again at last, in the frosty days before Christmas, it was not to either of us that she first turned for companionship and comfort. Quite unknown to us, she had been friends for some time with Margaret Flaherty, the comfortable wife of a small farmer, who had fostered Harry De Lacy in his delicate babyhood. Now everyone knows that the ties of fosterage are hardly less dear and close than those of maternity itself, and when Harry De Lacy came back to his wretched home at Angry, there had been no heart in all the place to welcome him except the faithful heart of his foster-mother.

We were glad when we discovered that Esther had this comfort. Her unhappiness had weighed heavily on her godmother. During that winter our dear old lady's age seemed suddenly to have found her out. Her bright, brisk, merry ways deserted her, and she began to be racked with rheumatism, the result, I suppose, of our damp climate. Yet she would not go away so long as Esther desired to stay; and when we spoke of it, Esther always cried out for a reprieve, as though news were on its way, which would surely arrive the minute she was absent.

All the time she was so tender, so loving, so full of compunction over her dear godmother, that we could not be angry with her, or think her selfish. I felt that she was held to the place by bonds which she was powerless to break. Yet she had promised to go in March,—they had a project of spending Easter in Rome,—and with that we had to be content.

The trouble weighed so much on my spirits that I had scarcely the heart to be glad when *Love in the Valley*

in its coat of delicate blue and silver, reached me a little before Christmas. Nor even when the first reviews were distinctly favourable. I began to grow pessimistic, I who had always been cheerful. Was there nothing but trouble in the sweet world? I asked myself as I looked about me. There was Esther breaking her heart, and we who loved her breaking ours with her in sympathy; there was Aline, looking for ever like a dove whose mate has flown; there was the dear old General, bearing like a saint and a soldier his own terrible trouble. Only the young ones were glad, and they were like lambs playing in the fields, whom every hour brought nearer to the butcher's knife.

"It is time," I said to myself one day, "for something happy to happen; for very long there have been nothing but unhappy things."

I spent my time now pretty well between Annagower and Rose Hill. The General at last had his house in order, and was sitting down, as he said, to enjoy life under his own fig-tree. But sometimes I thought it was a melancholy kind of enjoyment. He had been used to so active a life, and he was not of those who grow old easily. It would have suited him better to have dropped between the shafts.

I used to find it lonely and melancholy when I went in during the short winter afternoons, and found him sitting there with an odd, unhappy air of doing nothing. He used to brighten wonderfully when he saw me, but I knew that the sadness would come again when I went away. Presently, I felt, things would be better with him, for he had not yet shaken down into the new life.

"You must become a country gentleman," I said, "and a magistrate, and sit on boards, and farm a little. And in the intervals of your busy life you must write a book about your Indian experiences."

Then he would smile, and say I was right, and that presently he would find his work to his hand and do it.

But, brave and resigned as he was, I could see that the uncertainty about his son's fate was weakening the spring of life and energy in him.

We had finished cataloguing the library and getting it into order, and very proud I was of my work. The house was in the most spick-and-span condition, and there was nothing left for us to do. And now I began the feast of reading which I had promised myself.

Well, a day came when I bullied the General at last into getting into his cords and boots, and riding to a meet, which was at no great distance.

"Every country gentleman hunts," I said; "and you are shirking the duties of your state in life by not hunting."

"I was never a shirker, little girl," he replied, laughing; "and I suppose I must obey orders."

"I will wait and dine with you," said I, "if you're very good, and afterwards you can drive me home."

By this time General MacNeill was nearly as much our friend as Esther's godmother, and, like her, had brought untold pleasure into our humdrum lives.

He rode off, looking quite cheerful, and I felt that already he was better in the prospect of meeting his fellows, and having a good day after the fox. I was in a pleasanter mood with myself and the whole world,

when I settled down to my long quiet day, alone in the library, or alone except for Paudeen, who is the most unobtrusive company, and is never so rowdy but what he can vent his high spirits on tearing the paper in the waste-paper basket into infinitesimal strips.

It was twelve o'clock I found, after the General had departed, for he had only a short distance to ride to the meet.

The hours passed with luxurious slowness. At half-past one a maid brought my lunch and set it on a table drawn close to the fire. After lunch I read again till it was nearly tea-time; I expected the General to be in for his tea, a repast which he fondly loved.

About four, Mary O'Connor herself brought in the tea-tray, and lit the spirit-lamp under the urn. Having done this, she made up a bright little fire, and fetched the lamp with its large green shade. I had put down my book, and sat lazily watching her from my favourite seat, the top rung of the library steps, on which I perched, dangling my feet.

"You've no idea, Mary," I said, "of how jolly the room looks from here."

"Glory be to goodness, child!" said Mary, for the thousandth time, "I wish you'd come off that ould flight o' steps, and sit in a chair like a Christian. 'Tis breakin' your neck you'll be one o' these days."

After she had gone out of the room I sat there listening to the song of the tea-urn, and feeling drowsily comfortable. Any moment I knew might bring the General, and it didn't seem worth while to get absorbed in a book again.

As I sat there, suddenly the door leading to the garden, which I had left unlocked, began to open. I watched it with some alarm. Tramps were few in our neighbourhood, yet occasionally the mines brought rough customers looking for work, who would not be at all agreeable people to meet. Fortunately I am not the nervous kind, or I should have fallen off my high seat. As it was, I sat still to await developments, while Paudeen made for the door, with hair bristling and little white teeth showing.

When the door was fully opened a man came a step over the threshold, and stood looking about the room. As there was no light beyond the radius of the fire and lamp I could not see him very well. He was dressed in a long rough coat, and was wearing a soft hat which hid his face.

Since he did not seem inclined to come any further, and had plainly no idea of my presence, I sat still, hoping he would go. But suddenly there was a growl and a dart from Paudeen, and the stranger uttered an exclamation, then stooping, he lifted my little dog by the scruff of its neck.

"Oh, please don't hurt him!" I broke out piteously. "I'm so sorry if he's bitten you, but he's my little dog, and he thought it his duty."

"Hello!" said the stranger, advancing a step or two, and still holding Paudeen. "Are you one of the family portraits, or do you live in mid-air?"

As he stood blinking towards me in the darkness, plainly not seeing me, I burst out laughing. It was partly relief, because the minute he spoke I knew he

was a gentleman and no tramp, and partly because it was so funny that I should have addressed him out of the ceiling, so to speak.

He put down Paudeen very gently, saying:

"Now, little chap, don't nip me again. Honour bright!" I saw that Paudeen began to wag his tail as if his doubts had been set at rest.

Then the stranger deliberately took off the lamp-shade, and, lifting the lamp, advanced towards me, holding it so that he could see me.

I felt rather absurd all at once, and cried out:

"I'm only sitting on the library steps reading. Please put down the lamp, and I'll come down."

But he lifted the lamp instead, and stared at me attentively. As he took in my abashed features he uttered a long whistle.

Then he put down the lamp and said deliberately:

"The last time I saw you I picked you out of a ditch. And now I find you sitting on the top of a ladder."

I uttered a shriek of delight, and utterly forgetting myself and my shyness I scrambled down the steps anyhow, upsetting several books as I did so, and caught the stranger by the two hands.

"Oh, you are Lance!" I cried, "Lance come back, thank God! The General will die of joy."

"We mustn't let him do that, little girl. That's why I came prospecting by the back-door. I did not know how to approach him. Is he well?"

"He will be quite well now that he has you. I am expecting him every minute. He must not see you till I have told him you are here."

"But who are you, you mysterious child? I only know you as the little girl of Annagassan Races. How do you come to be here, and looking after my father?"

So recalled to myself, I blushed, and let his hands, which unconsciously I had been holding, drop.

"I am Hilda Brandon," I said, "and your father is our dear friend."

"Whew!" said he with an air of comic perplexity. "Then I suppose you are grown-up and a young lady, and I have been taking you for a child and a peasant. Why didn't you undeceive me that day long ago?"

"You never asked me."

"But you knew I didn't like your vanishing into thin air. Still, I admit that I was an unready fellow."

"And where have you been all those years?"

"Since you saw me?"

"Since you left your father."

"The greater part of the time in a tower in the hill-country above the Khyber Pass, a prisoner, and expecting my quietus every day."

"And you escaped?"

"Fortunately for me, my tribe kicked up a rumpus, and a British regiment came along and blew my tower to pieces, and very nearly blew me sky-high with it. Only, I managed to let them know in time. However, all that is a story for a winter's night."

"Ah!" said I, "the General heard something of this months ago, but did not dare to hope that the prisoner was you. Then the war broke out, and we heard no more."

"The fellows who had kicked open my rat-trap stayed

to fight, so the matter never got reported at head-quarters. I was sorely tempted to stay with them, but the thought of the dad restrained me. I made my way through the hills and back into the regions of her Imperial Majesty's government. At some stages of that journey I was in as bad case, nearly, as I was in my tower. But why do I tell you all this? I am here anyhow, and now, how will the dad take it?"

"Oh, joy never kills!" said I.

He looked at me with an oddly shy look.

"Perhaps you do not know,—” he began.

"That you parted in anger? Oh, yes, I do! Well, I should think neither of you will ever be angry again while you live."

"Oh, that's a large order!" he said laughing. "Still, I had time for repentance."

"So had the General," said I. "He is never angry now."

"Dear old dad!" he said; "if he isn't, I shall think the fairies have been changing him. He may be as angry as he likes with me for all the rest of his days, but I'll never take him at his word again—never."

"I am glad you are ashamed of yourself," said I.

"That's rubbing it in, and ungenerous, Miss Hilda, especially to a man newly come from the dead, as it were."

"Hush!" I cried, "for I had heard a horse's hoofs on the gravel. "Your father is coming. He must not see you suddenly. Here, come behind the screen till I have prepared him."

"Don't take long, Miss Hilda, or I shall burst out upon him as soon as I hear his dear voice."

"Have patience," said I; "I shall not take long."

I had just time to draw the screen across his corner when the General came in, stamping with his feet as he pulled off his riding-gloves.

"Ah, this is pleasant!" he said. "There's a touch of frost to-night. I hope the wind will change, or it will spoil the hunting."

"I'm glad you're keen about it," said I. "Had a good day?"

"Capital. I'll tell you about it when I've changed. I'm too muddy for a lady's tea-table."

"You're not going to change," said I, "not till you've had a cup of tea. You're quite good enough for me," and I pushed him into a chair.

"Very well, very well," he said, "it's not as it ought to be; but when a lady takes command."

I began to make the tea with a hand that trembled. I was wondering what I should say next, and an occasional impatient rustle in the corner flurried me still more.

"Ah!" said the General, "what is that? Oh, is it you, you rascal?" for Paudeen had made a timely appearance from behind the screen.

The general reached over and took the cup of tea from my hand.

"Do you know, little girl," he said, "your prescription has done me good? I felt uncommonly cheerful to-day. I suppose there's some hint of the spring in the air that touches up even old blood like mine."

"General," said I, "do you think that you felt cheerful perhaps because—because—good news was coming?"

He put down his cup and stared at me.

"Do you mean anything, Hilda?" he said. "You know what good news means for me. Have you heard anything?"

"Yes, I have heard something."

"Tell me, then," he said, rising and advancing a step. "I'm not a child or a woman. You have news of Lance?"

"Why, yes," I cried, between laughing and weeping. "Thank God! news has come—news of the best. It has brought—Lance."

Then a tall figure from behind the screen hurled itself at the General like a stone from a catapult. I gave just a glance at the two men shaking hands with the most tremendous energy, and heard the General's broken "Thank God!" Then I went out and left them together.

Now, as I am nothing if not severely practical, I went straight to Mary O'Connor, and told her of the wonderful occurrences of the last half-hour. That good woman quite fulfilled my expectations of her. With a flurry, which was no flurry, she issued her commands.

"Run up, you, Jane, to the best bed-room and light a fire, and put out the best linen sheets to air."

And then in an aside to me:

"I don't suppose the cratur's slept in a dacent bed this many a year."

I didn't mind saying anything about the long homeward journey, which must have inured the wanderer once more to sleeping in sheets, for Mary went on:

"The table for three to-night, Anne; an' the best table-linen; the satin damask with the little cockle-shells upon it; an' all the silver you can get into use. An' you, Miss

Hilda, run out like a good child an' coax Crosspatch to cut some o' them ould flowers of his. 'Tis a great day for Rose Hill entirely."

I knew the culinary matters might safely be left in Mary's hands, so I went off obediently to the gardener, whose proper name, Crosbie, had easily become Crosspatch in Mary's mouth.

He was as disagreeable as most gardeners about cutting his flowers, though I could usually get what I wanted from him. However, he rose to the occasion on this day of days, and when he heard of the General's great joy, was as anxious as anyone to do his share in celebrating it.

"An' to think, glory be to God (there's me best Camille de Rohan for you), that the Lord's looked down on the master at last (come down here, you conthrary divil; some o' them roses is as unwillin' to be picked as some people is to die), an' sent him home the young master to be the prop an' stay av his ould age (there goes the finest Malmaison in the County Kerry!). Sure, 'tis wonderful! wonderful! Well, the Lord is good to his own. (You've destroyed me prospects at the show entirely.) Click, click; I'd as soon you'd be cuttin' off meself as them tubey roses. Here, take them! Don't have me lookin' at them. 'Tis a holy show you've made o' the greenhouse!"

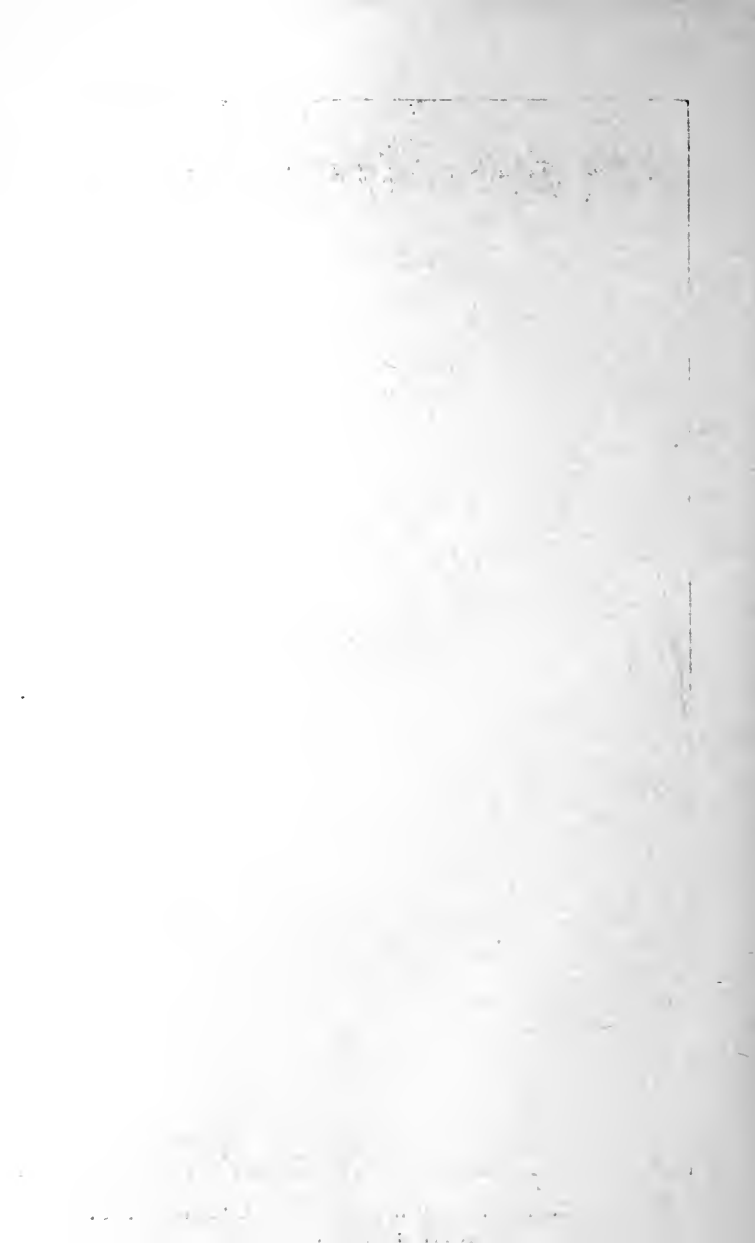
"Never mind, Crosbie," said I, "you don't grudge them to-day," as I took the heaped-up basket.

"I try not to, I try not to," he said gloomily. "But there's that man at the Towers. He'll be havin' a fine crow over me at Aisther. Yerra! why didn't the mather's son put off comin' till the show was over for another year?"



M 436

"HE WAS AS DISAGREEABLE AS MOST GARDENERS ABOUT
CUTTING HIS FLOWERS."



I left the old man amid his half-comical regrets, and went to the dining-room, which I found resplendent with silver and fine linen. I had made up my mind to slip off as soon as I had arranged the flowers, so as to let the General and his restored son have their first meal together alone.

But just as I was setting the last satiny rose amid its bronze leaves in the last specimen-glass, the General came in search of me.

"Ah, decorating, Hilda!" he said. "My boy is gone upstairs to have a wash. How glad I am that you were here to welcome him, and to give me the good news!"

"And very stupidly I did it. I was expecting him to burst cover every minute of my bungling."

"Oh, no, my dear! it was most kind and considerate. My boy tells me he remembers you quite well, and recognized you at once."

"I haven't changed much," I said carelessly. "But now, General, that I have finished, I am going to make myself scarce. Hawkins will drive me to Brandon."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said the General, a choleric spark coming into his eye. "You're not going to drop me now Lance has come, I can tell you."

"I don't mean to drop you the least bit in the world. But you will have so much to say to each other this very first evening."

"Nothing that we don't want you to share. Why, little girl"—and a wonderful smile broke over his face—"we have years before us in which to talk, please God, for Lance has promised never to leave me again."

So I consented to stay, feeling rather dissatisfied with

my plain frock of navy-blue serge on this day of rejoicing. Still, with a cluster of Crosspatch's Camille de Rohans fastened at the belt, I brightened it up a little for dinner, and hoped I did not look very dingy when I arrived in the dining-room.





CHAPTER XXVI.

THE UGLY DUCKLING.

CAPTAIN MACNEILL—I felt as if I must always call him Lance in my own mind—came forward when I entered the library after the dinner-bell had rung.

“You’ll have to dine with a wild man of the woods, Miss Brandon,” he said apologetically. “I have only the clothes I stand up in.”

“Never mind, Lance,” said his father, “we’re glad to have you in any. We’ll go over to London next week, and I’ll give you a blank cheque for Poole. You’ve no idea what a dandy he has always been, Hilda!”

“Oh, I remember him!” said I. “Like Solomon in his glory—that is to say, dressed like any other well-dressed young man.”

“And I remember you—”

Lance broke off with a quizzical glance.

“Come, my lad, postpone reminiscences till we’re over the soup,” said the General as he offered me his arm.

We dined at a little round table, which brought us all in close neighbourhood. As Captain MacNeill ate his soup I had time to look at him. He was a good deal changed from the young man I remembered. No doubt

rest and good living would bring back much of the youth and brightness, but there were lines in the keen brown face that would never be obliterated. He was thin, and a little haggard: that, of course, was to be expected; but the years of suffering had not changed his eyes, nor his smile, with its quick flash of white teeth; by these I felt I should have known him under any circumstances.

"How good everything here is!" he said, looking up suddenly. "I never knew how beautiful a thing a dinner-table was before. Such flowers in the winter! And how golden the candle-light is! To say nothing at all of this delicious soup!"

"Ah! Mrs. O'Connor has done her best with the cookery. I am glad you still care for your food, my boy. Appetite, rightly considered, is a gift of God."

The young man's eyes twinkled.

"I've the appetite of a school-boy still, and you remember, Dad, that mine was a record, even for Harrow. I've been saving it up all the years of my imprisonment."

"Hilda decorated the table in your honour. How she got the flowers out of old Crosbie I don't know!"

"He's a heart-broken man to-night, General," said I. "Still, to give him his due, he chopped away generously under the excitement of the good news, though to an accompaniment of grumbles."

"Crosbie's a good fellow," said the General. "I think I must take on that lad of his, though there's little enough for him to do."

"There's an epidemic of joy in the household, General. If you begin rewarding, I don't know where you'll stop."

"Hilda thought to reward us, Lance, by running away without her dinner."

"That would have been unkind," said the Captain seriously.

"You don't know what she's been to me, Lance," said the General, looking at me affectionately. "I was such a lonely old man till that day I came into my desolate house, and found her perched on my library steps, a little bit of white and gold, like a daisy."

"I found her in precisely the same position," said the Captain, laughing. "Do you live at such an eminence, Miss Hilda?"

"Pretty well," the General answered for me. "She's an uncanny child, and will read in the most uncomfortable positions."

"Till Mary O'Connor goes in incessant dread of my falling down like a precious china figure, and getting broken," said I, feeling rather embarrassed at being the subject of conversation.

"Hilda has a prescriptive right to the library, Lance," said the General.

"I sha'n't dispute it," said Captain MacNeill. "Is everybody else shut out altogether?"

"When she wills it. She is a successful writer, you know, and when she comes to a crux in the story she, having nerves, can't bear the presence of anyone but Paudeen, who is sympathetic, she says.

"Are you really an author, Miss Hilda?" said Captain MacNeill, with real or simulated astonishment.

"She is, my boy, and a successful one at that," answered the General.

"I shall be horribly afraid of you, Miss Hilda. But what precocity! At what age do people begin to write novels nowadays?"

Captain MacNeill seemed determined not to take me seriously. I didn't altogether like his lack of seriousness about my authorship.

"I was twenty-one last May," said I. "It is not so very young."

"Not really twenty-one, Miss Hilda?" said the Captain. "Then why do you go on looking fifteen?"

"Because I'm small, I suppose," I said. "But you must have known I was grown-up, for I was a big girl when you saw me first five years ago."

"So you were," he said. "I remember now that when I lifted you in the donkey-cart I thought you were like a very considerable piece of thistle-down that a fairly robust south wind might blow away."

"Please don't talk about that silly time," said I. "But the General is telling stories about my nerves. If I have any I vent them on Paudeen and the four walls of my little room at home. I have never written a line yet in Rose Hill library."

"Time you should begin, Hilda," said the General. "If you'll set up your study here I'll promise you this fellow and I won't disturb you. Life seems to be so full of things to be done, now he has come home, that I don't know which thing to begin at to-morrow morning."

"Oh, General!" said I, "I must be at home sometimes. Why, I have been spending nearly half my life at Rose Hill this winter."

"And why not?" said the General. "A couple of lonely

buffers like us want you more than Brandon can. Do you know that she catalogued and arranged all our library, Lance?"

"Well," said I, half-laughing and half-confused, "I should think you two could find something to talk about this night of nights other than me."

"Why, my dear," said the General mildly, "I like to tell Lance all you have been to me—a bird of good omen in my lonely life. I had had no joy for so long before you came—since this fellow left me, in short,—and then you came into my life, like a—like a dear little daughter. She has been like that to me, Lance."

"I am very glad, sir," said Captain MacNeill gently; but something in his eyes as he looked at me made me turn, all of a sudden, redder than the roses in my belt.

Fortunately the dear old General never looked at me, but I was acutely conscious of the gaze, half-kind, half-quizzical, of the eyes across the table. I did not know why I had blushed, and felt furious with myself.

"Did you know that Hilda recognized your portrait at once, Lance?"

"Dear General," said I, "if you mention my name, or refer to me even indirectly again during dinner, you shall be fined. Do make him talk about his adventures instead."

"Ah! you don't know Lance. He was a laconic fellow from childhood about anything that concerned himself. We'll only get his adventures from him by bits and scraps."

But Captain MacNeill seemed to understand that I was really a little uncomfortable at being talked about so

much, and turned the conversation in the deftest and kindest way.

I gave them their coffee in the library before I went home, and after I had gone in and said good-night to them, and they had escorted me to the dog-cart, which Hawkins was to drive, I carried away the happiest impression of the peace and joy I had left behind. The night was cold enough to make me nestle down inside the fleecy rug which Captain MacNeill had wrapped about me, but the picture I carried in my mind was of the father and son sitting, one on each side of a glowing fire, with their cigars between their lips and their eyes fondly regarding each other.

After that evening I did not go to Rose Hill for a day or so, but on the second day came the General himself driving over to fetch me back. In a week or so Captain MacNeill, whose wardrobe had become renovated after a hurried run to Dublin, came and called with his father, and won everybody's heart, from Aline's to the youngest of the twins.

The boys were now in the shy and gawky stage, and required a good deal of coaxing out of their shells, and for a time they were very awkward with this bronzed man of the world, who had had so many adventures, and was so modest and reticent about them. However, before the close of the visit, I saw that the ice was thawing, and guessed that in a very short time they would be calling him MacNeill, and smoking his cigars with all the ease in the world; and I was not mistaken. In fact, that state of things came about sooner than I could have believed possible, and presently a certain difference of opinion arose

between the boys and the twins, for the boys were quite certain that it was only MacNeill's decency that made him put up with a pair of stupid little duffers like the twins when there were men to be had; and the twins, on the other hand, believed, and said openly, that they were the real attraction that so often brought Captain MacNeill to Brandon.

Aline, the dear mother of us all, was not without qualms about my visiting at Rose Hill as freely as of old, now that the house contained an additional inhabitant in the shape of an attractive young man; but what could she and I and the conventionalities do against the absolute unconsciousness of the dear old General? If I stayed away he would come or send for me, and it was as impossible for me to repulse his affection as it was for Aline to reveal her scruples to him. At last she consulted Lady O'Brien about it, and that dear woman responded with her usual common-sense:

"Let the child go as before, Aline," she said. "It isn't the world, and there's no one to make invidious remarks; and if there were I'd let them talk till doomsday before I'd come between Hilda and her friends."

So I came and went as of old, and soon lost much of my shyness of Captain MacNeill, whom indeed I only met at meals, or for an odd half-hour occasionally. He and his father seemed to find so much to take them out of the house now. The General had become so keen and alert about things that thirty years might have been suddenly lifted off his life, and as I became aware of how they were being sought by the neighbours—we called everyone within thirty miles neighbours—and being asked

here and there, and besought to take up this and that position, I was conscious of an odd kind of jealousy. General MacNeill and Rose Hill had seemed so much to belong to me, that if it was going to be swamped now by the county families, and I driven out, as I surely should be if they came in,—well then, I shouldn't be too well pleased, that was all.

Certainly they had not come yet, and the greater stir in the house caused by its new inhabitant was so far distinctly pleasant. Mary O'Connor felt it as I did.

"'Tis more heartsome like," she said to me one day, "to have the young master to do for. The General is a desperate tidy gentleman, an' if it was only the cigar-ash on the floor, or the clothes flung anyway about the room, or even the bath-water splashed to that unchristian extent that it comes through the dinin'-room ceilin', I'd rather have a young gentleman to look after. Let alone that that Hawkins waits on the ould master like a cat in boots, till the silence and the tidiness grew so lonesome that I often had a mind to take a stravage through the rooms meself an' turn everything upside down. But, glory be! that onnatural temptation is removed from my path to-day."

Captain MacNeill was quite a long time at home before he saw Esther. She was not well in those days, and rather shrunk from meeting strangers. I used to wonder how the sight of her would affect him, for though Esther needed happiness to bring out her beauty in full bloom, yet the sorrow that dimmed her colour had given her eyes a more mysterious midnight beauty, so that, to my mind, she was lovelier for anyone who had eyes to see.

I was quite anxious that they should meet, and yet I had a curious shrinking from it. My anxiety was as for something painful that has to be gone through, and the sooner the better.

For I had made up my mind that Captain MacNeill must inevitably fall in love with Esther. I used to sit and look at her silently and try to see her as he would, and I said to myself that it was inevitable. Before Esther's eyes, and Esther's hair, and Esther's lovely colour—

Brown is my Love, but graceful,
And each renowned whiteness
Matched with that lovely brown loseth its brightness.

—what chance would there be for blue eyes and pale cheeks and pale hair—if such desired to be remembered?

And if he came to love Esther, would she not in time turn to his love and forget her boyish lover? Why, that was inevitable too. The elder, stronger man was, it seemed to me, so much more love-worthy. For in regard to Esther's love of Harry De Lacy I had always a little wonder. Now with me my love should be the stronger one, not I. And yet it seemed that the gentleness, the dependence, the need of Esther's lover was the dearest element in her love for him.

Ah well! there are different ways of loving, and she might yet love differently. Somehow, as I thought these things, I seemed to be the spectator of a drama in which I had no part. What part was cast for me indeed—plain, little, with a limping foot—but to look at happiness through the eyes of others? Yet I was not resigned.

On the contrary, my compassion for myself was so poignant that I often melted into tears.

At last the meeting came about. I was at Annagower one afternoon, when, about tea-time, the General and Captain MacNeill were announced. It was nearly twilight, and we were sitting by a leaping fire. Esther was listless enough, but the fire gave a simulated life to her beauty, putting golden deeps into the darkness of her eyes, and bronze lights amid the shadows of her hair. She had a pretty pink frock of nun's veiling, and a handful of bronze leaves pinned in the soft folds at her throat.

I drew back in the shadows to see how Captain MacNeill took his first introduction to her. He looked at her alertly indeed, and when he had sat down in my corner beside me he looked at her again. I did not know whether I was sorry or glad. There was admiration in his look, but it was an admiration entirely impersonal and distant; and after those two glances he looked only at me.

He had been at home now several weeks, and in a day or two he and his father were going to London. There was business to be done, but they had been putting it off week after week, being so delightfully happy with each other at Rose Hill.

The day after their call at Annagower I was in the library at Rose Hill. I had come in by the side-door unannounced, and imagined I had the house to myself, pretty well, as usual, till the door opened and Captain MacNeill walked in.

"Why," I said, "are you at home to-day?"

"Yes; don't look so distressed about it. My father is

at the Petty Sessions at Raheenduff. This is the first day he takes his seat on the bench. And here am I, like the little boy in the story, who had no one to play with, and appealed to all the insects in turn, but they were all too busy. Miss Hilda, are you too busy, or may I sit down here?"

"You may, if you will tell me first which of the insects I represent?" I said severely.

"It's too hard, Miss Hilda. Let it be a bird or a flower," he said with imploring eyes.

I passed over the suggestion in silence. Then I rushed awkwardly into a subject which had been much in my mind.

"I was glad you met my sister yesterday. I have always wanted you to meet her."

"Thank you. I was very pleased to meet her," he said simply.

"She is my chum of all the family," I said. "I think there is no one like Esther."

"She is a very lovely creature," he answered.

"You remembered her again?" I asked.

"No," he said, looking at me questioningly. "Did I see her before?"

Well, I don't mind confessing that a little wave of joy rushed over my heart. I could hardly keep my voice still as I answered him, for I had told myself so often that his eyes that day long ago must have been for Esther.

"Why, of course," said I. "She was with me that day at Annagassan races."

"I only saw one face there," he said softly.

"Miss Pettigrew's?" I asked mischievously.

"Miss Pettigrew!" he repeated in astonishment.

"Yes, you remember you were walking with her when you first passed close to our shandrydan early in the day?"

"Ah! I remember; I had forgotten her name. Someone, a man in my regiment, had asked me to take her to see the leaping at the stone wall. I never saw her afterwards. But"—with a flash of triumph—"you noticed me then and remembered me?"

"I couldn't help it. You were looking at us when I was capering about because an Irish horse had won."

"I can see you now," he said.

"Don't, please!" I cried out. "I must have looked too silly."

"Shall I tell you how you looked?"

My eyes dropped before his, and I trembled, but I said nothing.

"I will tell you then. I thought you the dearest, sweetest, softest little white-and-gold girl in all the world."

"Oh!" I cried out, and held my fingers tightly across my eyes. "You couldn't. I am Hilda the Ugly Duckling. How could you look at me when Esther was there?"

"Perhaps I like ugly ducklings," he said.

"And I have a lame foot!" I cried.

"Dear little foot! We will cure it."

I removed my fingers from before my eyes and said:

"The Dublin doctor said it would cure itself. I am not nearly as lame as I used to be."

"Ah! that is a good thing," he answered, laughing; "but even if it were not curable, do you think that would come between us?"

I said nothing, not quite knowing what to say.

"Come down here, you white witch," he said next, "or am I to climb your ladder for you?"

"Oh, I will come down," I said, "but why?"

"Because I want the size of your finger. I will bring you the prettiest ring I can find in Bond Street."

"Your father will think it very sudden," I said lamely.

"He will sing his *Nunc Dimittis*," he answered. "But we will keep him with us as long as we can all the same."





CHAPTER XXVII

THE WEB OF THE SPIDER.

I REFUSED to wait to see the General, but rather made Lance take me home early.

"I won't forbid your telling him," I said, "since you think it will make him so happy, but I don't want it talked about for a few days, till I have grown used to it, and you come back."

So he consented, only saying how unlike we were, for he wanted everyone to know his new importance; and I did not know whether he jested or not.

I made him say good-bye to me on the doorstep of Brandon, and watched him climb into the dog-cart again, grumbling at my tyranny and want of hospitality. I could not trust myself to sit opposite him in the presence of Aline and the others without betraying my secret, over which I felt so exquisitely shy.

Dear Aline suspected nothing, but was quite satisfied with my explanation that Captain MacNeill had not come in because he wanted to be back in time to meet his father.

And now began for me the strangest, goldenest, most exquisite time of dreams. It might have been May in the world instead of January, and the sun shining instead

of the rain incessantly falling. That was a terribly wet season—the wettest, said the old people, that the longest memory could recall.

There was distress in Brandon village, and all about the country. Rotting thatch was falling into the poor cabins and on to the reeking mud floors, so that in many cases the wretched fires of half-green twigs were extinguished and the bed whereon the sick or the old or the babies lay went travelling round the bare walls, seeking a sound spot where the rain would not find it. It was at such times of distress that we felt our poverty most keenly, though I think our good people knew as well as we did how great our will was to help them.

Yet even the trouble of others could not damp my joy in those days, or at least it shadowed my life on only one side of it, and the other lay incessantly turned to the sun.

But still I thought a good deal about Esther's trouble, which I seemed to understand better in the light of my own joy. Amid my thanksgivings for my own sweet happiness, I prayed hard for her that her trouble might be removed and her joy given back, if God saw well to do it.

We had not met since the great downpour began, and that was the very day Lance and his father set out for London. It was no weather for being out of doors, and we did not expect the little brown pony-chaise to come rattling up as before. The great sheets of leaden-gray water that fell incessantly would have been enough to sweep the little pony off his feet, and as the days passed we began to hear stories of floods covering the country, and bridges being swept away; and at last the boys

ran in one morning with tidings that Brandon River was out, and was bringing down hay-ricks, turf-stacks, uprooted trees, and even little drowned mountain sheep on its tide.

But one morning at last the rain ceased, and we looked out on a watery world indeed, and a gray sky without a rift of blue. Still, the rain had ceased, and for that we were devoutly thankful.

I was meditating a rush out to get some fresh air, for it seemed likely enough that the rain would soon begin again, when my door was opened softly by Bride, the little new maid.

"If you please, Miss," she said mysteriously, "this was to be given into your very own hands. Little Johnny from the Inch Farm has come with it this minute."

I took the bit of paper from the little maid's hand in wonder, and she went out nodding and smiling, apparently well satisfied now her commission was safely executed.

The note was from Esther, and was written in pencil on a leaf evidently torn from a note-book.

Come to me here, Hilda, at the Inch Farm, at once, and say nothing to anybody. I want you more than I ever did in my life before.—Esther.

I put on my frieze cape and a cap, to be equipped against the rain, and went out without meeting anybody.

The Inch Farm belonged to Michael O'Flaherty, the husband of Esther's friend Margaret, Harry De Lacy's foster-mother. I guessed that the urgent message had something to do with Esther's lover, and as I got over the ground as quickly as possible, I was praying silently

that there might not be further grief and trouble for my poor sister.

The Inch Farm lies towards the river, into which a portion of the farm-land projects almost like an island. It is, however, connected with the mainland, except when water is very low in the river, by a rough causeway of stones. But fortunately the farmhouse itself lies high and dry where the fields ascend towards Brandon Mountain.

I made my way to the farmhouse by a muddy lane, and through a farm-yard full of quacking ducks and hissing geese, all casting weather-wise eyes to the horizon. At the kitchen door, which was nearer to me than the little green hall door, a donkey stood under his low-backed car. I gave a glance at it as I passed, and noticed with surprise that the cart was filled with rugs and blankets, and apparently a very comfortable feather-bed.

As I entered the kitchen Mrs. O'Flaherty's smiling daughter Katie, a rosy-cheeked, black-eyed slip of sixteen, came to meet me.

"They're waiting for you, Miss," she said mysteriously, "idin in the parlour."

She opened the door, and I passed into that close-smelling *sanctum sanctorum* of an Irish farmhouse, the best parlour. I did not give a glance at its glories. It was like fifty others I knew—trellised wall-paper, stiff white muslin curtains, flowery carpet and horse-hair furniture, and a curious country smell of damp and closed windows.

As I entered, Esther jumped up from the sofa and ran to meet me. She wore her out-of-door apparel, and was

evidently making a vain effort to take some of Mrs. O'Flaherty's seed-cake and sherry. That comfortable woman herself sat (in her bonnet and with a great air of importance) about a yard from the table and her own portion of wine and cake.

"Oh, Hilda darling, I'm so glad you've come!" said Esther, hugging me impulsively. "Now, Maggie, you'll be satisfied," she said, turning to Mrs. O'Flaherty.

"You know I didn't want to cross you," said the latter, "and with one of the family to bear you out I've nothing to say."

"But what is it all about?" I asked.

Mrs. O'Flaherty adjusted her bonnet-strings, and was evidently about to answer me at great length when Esther interposed.

"The long and the short of it is," she said, with an excited little laugh, "is—that we have discovered that Sir Rupert has Harry imprisoned in that horrible place, and we're going to kidnap him. There!" she said, lifting her finger, "you can tell Miss Hilda everything about it as we go along, Maggie. We had better start now while the day is young and the rain holds off."

I heard everything as we trudged along in front of the donkey-cart, while the rear was brought up by Michael O'Flaherty and his big son Larry.

It seemed that Mrs. O'Flaherty's youngest, Tim, had heard so much of Castle Angry in the days of his mother's sojourn there, that the place had acquired a fatal fascination for him.

"Flyin' kites he'll be," said his mother, "agin' the walls o' that unlucky ould house, an' prospectin' for *pinkeens*



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“HE SEEN THE STONE THAT HAD HIT HIM, AN’ A BIT OF PAPER
WRAPPED AROUND IT.”

an' *dalgalukers* (i.e. minnows and newts) in that stinkin' moat, till I'm expectin' him to come home to me in quarters. Shoutin' out at night he does be with the terror of the drames that does be on him, that Sir Rupert has him, or Yalla Gaskin, that's worse, or them brutes o' dogs,—though I wouldn't liken them that can't sin to wicked men. But 'tis the nature of boys that the very fear draws him. He owns up to it himself; 'Often,' he says, 'when I comes to the ould wood I do be diggin' me finger-nails in the threes to hould me, but I goes on all the same.'

"'Yerra, my boy,' says I, 'maybe 'tis your father's belt will be houldin' ye.' But he minds that no more thin Sir Rupert or the dogs, an' 'tis a long time the same belt's promised him, for O'Flaherty's soft-hearted, an' never could bring himself to batin' the childher.

"Well, glory be to Them above for that same parvarcity of the boy, for the day before yesterday him an' the Widdy Byrne's innocent son, that had no more sinse but to follow him, was paddlin' in the moat, enjoyin' themselves all the more because they expected every minit 'ud be their last, when Johnny was struck on the poll by a nate lump of a stone. 'Murder!' says he, 'they're stonin' me!' for he had no more thought but that it was Gaskin's tricks. Then no more stones came, an' when he had felt his poll to make sure there wasn't a crack in it, he seen the stone that had hit him starin' him in the face, an' a bit of paper wrapped around it.

"Johnny's no scholar, for he's always mitchin' from school, but he had the sinse to put the thing in his pocket an' bring it home to me, though I'd promised him

a lambastin' he'd never forgit the first time he went near Castle Angry.

"You might have knocked me down with a straw when I saw the bit of a letter was addressed to meself. An' there it was from my beautiful lamb that I'd nursed, saying that he was too ill to get out o' that unlucky ould house by himself, an' had no one to help him but his Maggie. An' if I'd come to-day he'd be able to open the door to us, for Sir Rupert an' Gaskin were to be off on some divilmint. 'Bring a carriage for me,' says he, 'for I'm a-past walking.'"

The good woman paused for breath, and her husband took up the tale with a broad grin.

"I sez to her that it was a case of housebreakin', an' 'ud bring us widin the law. 'If you're afeard, Mike O'Flaherty,' she sez, 'say so, an' I goes alone.' 'Is it me to be afeard of anything, woman,' says I, 'an' I after marryin' you?'"

He looked at his partner's comely face with a jovial pride, pleasant to witness.

"Maggie wanted me not to come," said Esther, "but I said I must. I should go wild not knowing what was happening."

"'Twas common prudence, Miss," said Mrs. O'Flaherty. "What 'ud people say if they heard that Miss Brandon was housebreakin' and kidnappin' at Castle Angry?"

"That was very sensible of you, Mrs. O'Flaherty," I said.

"You'll be guided by your own sister now, Miss Essie," said the good woman, nodding severely at Esther.

"I only satisfied Maggie's scruples by promising that

you would come to give the sanction of the family, by your presence, to my unconventional act."

I looked at Esther with amazement. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks vividly flushed. Her hair was crisp about her brow, crisper for the damp air, which was deliciously sweet. She walked with a swinging step, so that I had some trouble in keeping up with her. Was this the languid Esther of the last three months, about whom I had often a dark unexpressed fear lest she should be going the way that Pierce went?

"I am glad you let her come, Mrs. O'Flaherty," I said soberly. "It is hard to sit at home doing nothing."

Esther looked at me gratefully, and then put a caressing arm about me.

"All very well, Miss," said Mrs. O'Flaherty gloomily. "But how will it be if Sir Rupert meets us with a blunderbuss?"

"Oh, he won't do that!" said I, laughing, though in my heart I wasn't at all sure. "But if he did, what would you do, Maggie?"

"Stan' her ground," answered her husband for her. "She's a great Trojan, Miss, let alone that the foster-son's more to her than her own flesh and blood."

Our way lay through by-roads and coppices, and we met no one to wonder at our strange little procession. Presently the donkey-cart had to part company from us, and to meet us again after a detour, because the road was under water, and we could only pass by taking to the fields. This left Esther and me together, for Mrs. O'Flaherty trudged the lanes with her husband and her son.

"It's an odd way of doing it, Essie," said I.

"It is, Hilda, but the only way."

"I'd rather have driven up in a carriage in broad daylight and taken him away," said I.

"Supposing Sir Rupert had shut the gates in our faces?"

"There would be ways of making him open them."

"And a pretty bit of scandal for the county, where there is already too much scandal about my Harry's grandfather."

"I wish the General had been here," I said uneasily.

"He could not have helped, Hilda. Don't you see that the thing is best done quietly?"

"Does your godmother know?"

"She knows I am with you this morning. That is all."

"She would approve?"

"Surely. Do you know her and doubt? I only did not tell her because she is helpless and could not be with us. I shall go to her straight and tell her as soon as my Harry is safe under his foster-mother's wing at the Inch Farm."

"He will be safe there?"

"Safer than anywhere in the world,—except with me."

"And afterwards, Esther?"

"I will marry him as soon as ever it can be arranged. My godmother will help me, and I think Mr. Benson would make things smooth for us."

"What if you find your Harry very ill?"

She trembled, and for a moment a shadow fell upon her radiant face. Then it lifted again.

"I look to find him ill. When he is so helpless that he

has had to remain in the clutches of those miscreants for very weakness, he must be ill indeed. But there is the more reason for hastening our marriage. Happiness will make him well."

"I think you are right, Esther. But how will it be if Lady O'Brien and Aline take the prudent view, and think you should wait till he is stronger?"

"They will not," she said patiently; "but if they did I should still know I was right. If he were stronger I could wait for years."

"You will be poor, Essie."

"Very," she said with a happy smile. "Or at least Harry says that the three hundred a year he has from his mother will mean poverty."

"And Sir Rupert, they say, has untold gold laid up in Castle Angry," I said regretfully.

"Brandon money," said Esther, "the fruits of fraud and treachery. We would not touch a penny of it."

"You won't get the chance, my dear," said I. "But what do you think Sir Rupert meant by keeping Harry hidden away in Castle Angry?"

"God knows," she answered with a little shudder.

"He lied about him when he said he had gone away. Do you think he meant to keep him apart from you as long as he could?"

"Perhaps," she answered.

"Or, Esther, do you think he thought he would die? Why, he might as well have murdered him as kept him wasting away for want of care and treatment. Besides, before he grew so ill they must have detained him by force."

Her hands closed and unclosed themselves spasmodically.

"We will not talk about it," she said. "At least not now. Let God judge him."

We were now at the entrance to the starved and ragged wood which grew on the lower slopes of Angry Mountain.

"Let us wait here," she said, "for Maggie and the cart."

And now that we were approaching the place of evil omen I saw that she had grown pale.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

OUT OF THE WEB.

WE were in the wood, and the boggy ground under our feet was giving way at every step. The wood seemed all bog except for the uneven pathway which gave, in dry weather, a solid resting place. On every side, under the tangled boughs, the ground was a brilliant treacherous green. No rabbits scuttled from under our feet as in Brandon Woods, no squirrel ran lightly from bough to bough. We did not hear a bird chirp; all the naked boughs of the branches showed here and there a startling white surface, as though the tree had been stripped by lightning. A wind had got up, and the whole wood was creaking and groaning. The trees were many of them very old, and had flung themselves in strange unnatural postures; the knots and gnarls on the old oaks were like the grinning faces in gargoyles. It was easy to see why the country people were afraid of Angry Woods.

Even in the cold light of morning the woods were eerie. In dusk they must look as if peopled by a multitude of mocking manikins, with here and there among them a towering white ghost. From the green and slimy

bog, on which if you trod you might find a grave, a thousand gaily-coloured fungi sprang, and from the joints of the trees immense fairy mushrooms had burst out and thriven gigantically.

"Quiet, quiet, Neddy!" I heard Mike O'Flaherty say to the donkey, whose little hoofs he was guiding upon the pathway.

"If there's another downpour," he called out to us, "the path'll be washed back into the bog. We're not a day too soon, maybe, about our business."

We answered him cheerfully over our shoulders; but the wind that had now sprung up was not conducive to conversation, let alone that the noise of the trees was like the shrieking and groaning of wretches under the knout.

"'Twould be as well," I said to Esther, "that the bog should swallow it. This is a horrible place, this wood!" And she nodded for answer.

Presently we were clear of it, and climbing up the safer way through the ravine, and there above us on its plateau was Castle Angry frowning. It looked livid in the watery lights. It was partly stucco and partly ugly yellow brick, and the tracks of the rains on its stuccoed face were like great veins, as you saw it from a distance, or like green and dropping tears.

The ravine had a rocky ridge for its pathway that seemed as if at some time it had been the bed of a river which had scooped the earth out and left only the bones of it. We trod there more dry-foot, despite the little pools on the surface of it, but our wet boots as we walked squished and squirted uncomfortably.

"You'll be having a new cold to-morrow, Esther," I said.

"Not I," she said; "if Harry is safe I shall have no more ills. We will change as soon as ever we get back."

And now we were on the bright-green plateau, where the grass grew coarse and rank, and again the water bubbled about our feet. The face of Castle Angry turned this way was eyeless, and I was glad of it, for I would have imagined evil faces at the windows, if windows there had been.

We all kept closely together as we neared the gate, at least we all did except Esther, for she ran forward lightly and pulled the great iron bell-pull. We heard the bell sound somewhere deep inside the Castle, and then there came a roar from the dogs in the court-yard.

Mike O'Flaherty moved nearer to Esther, as if to protect her, but she did not seem to have heard the dogs. She was listening against the heavy gateway, with the intent expression of one whose heart listens.

Then we heard a voice speak to the dogs, and the baying ceased. There was the rattle of a chain and the drawing of a bolt, and then Harry De Lacy stepped through the postern and was in the midst of us.

I was startled at the change in him. His face had lengthened and grown hollow. There was a sparse growth of beard about his young cheeks, and his eyes had sunk far back into deep spaces. He was huddled in a great-coat, and it was evident that in thus escaping from Castle Angry he was expending all his remaining strength, for he trembled violently as he stood.

Then, with a moan of compassion, Esther put both her arms around him.

"Come, Mike," she said, "he is exhausted."

And indeed the boy's eyes had closed, and he seemed to be swooning.

"Easy now, Miss Essie," said Mike O'Flaherty; "give him to me."

He took the slight figure in his arms and lifted it into the donkey-cart. His wife settled the pillows and tucked in the blankets, with just such an expression as her face must often have worn when Harry De Lacy was a helpless child.

"They've nearly murdered you, acushla," she said, half to herself; "an' to think your Maggie was near, an' not knowing till 'twas too late."

While they were making the invalid easy, I stepped through the open door into the court-yard. Opposite to me frowned the low, prison-like door that led to the Castle itself. I longed to enter it, to see the places about which there were so many legends, but there was no time.

The court-yard itself was like a deep well into which little light entered. Round about it were little staring windows, unprotected by ivy. Not a green thing grew in the place, though the broken pavement was slimy with damp.

At one side the dogs were chained to heavy staples in the wall—great, lumbering, piteous-looking brutes, with their eyes full of blood. I did not feel afraid of them, and they showed no hostility. One, an old yellow dog, with sharp fangs, was, I thought, the one Sir Rupert had called "Venom" that day he had ridden under my tree long ago, but I could not be sure.

The dogs looked beyond me to the postern, through

which Harry De Lacy had passed, and their eyes were full of despair. I could well believe that they knew they were losing their one friend.

"Poor brutes!" I said to them. "I wish we could take you too."

But they looked away from my voice still towards the postern-gate.

"Come, Hilda," said Esther, close to me, "we are ready now, and it is time we were gone."

I looked round the place once more, and then stepped back across the threshold and pulled-to the door. As I did so the dogs set up a dismal howling, and as long as we were within earshot of the place the sound followed us.

Larry now went in front, leading the donkey. On either side of the cart Esther and Mrs. O'Flaherty walked, each watching absorbedly the face so dear to both of them, the face of the dead it might be, as it lay helplessly on the pillows, but moving to and fro with the motion of the cart.

Mike O'Flaherty and I walked behind, and the peasant's florid face wore an unusually grave look.

"'Twill be too bad, Miss Hilda," he said, as the cart disappeared from us round the bend of a path, "if we've only got him out to lose him after all."

"It will, Mike," said I; "but, please God, that won't be."

"Amen, Miss Hilda; but he looks mortal bad."

"He is young, Mike, and, God willing, he will recover. Your wife's nursing will do wonders for him."

"Oh, the woman'll do her best! 'Tis wonderful what nature is in women for the childher they've reared. I doubt now if she's as much took up wid her own Johnny."

"Oh, I am sure she is!" said I, fearing a tinge of jealousy in the speech of the good-natured giant; "only, you see, Johnny hasn't the great need of her that her foster-son has just now."

"True for you, Miss Hilda. The woman's love goes where the need is greatest, an' thank God for that same."

"Your Johnny did us a great service, Mike," I said. "I know my sister will never forget it."

"He did so, the young thief o' the world,—an', would you believe it, when it was all done herself threatened the boy with the belt, and left him bawlin' melia murther."

"I suppose Mrs. O'Flaherty thought discipline should be maintained at all costs."

"Indeed she's the wonderful woman entirely," said her spouse admiringly.

"What will you do, Mike," said I, "if Sir Rupert finds out your share in kidnapping his grandson, and makes trouble?"

"Show the ould villain the barrel o' me blunderbuss," said Mike. "Oh, indeed, Miss Hilda, I'm a stout man on me own hearthstone! I wouldn't be half the man to face him up there, though he's ould, an' I could twist Gaskin's neck as easy as a chicken's. But the place sends the cowl'd to my heart."

"It does to mine too, Mike," said I.

"Ah, see there now! There was a power o' wickedness done in it in ould times. 'Tis the smell of it about the place makes your blood run cowl'd."

"I suppose there was," I said.

"You may say it. There's a hole under it, I hear,

where they used to sling prisoners in the ould times. It went right through into the heart o' the world, maybe as far as the fires, for all I know. There was no end to it anyhow, an' they say you could hear the poor souls slippin' an' screechin' long after they fell. I never seen it meself," added Mike impartially.

We were now come to the wood, where the trees were still creaking and groaning, while now and again a broken branch flapped in our faces.

"'Tis well they may lament," said Mike. "A-many a fine fellow hung on them in ould days wid the feet of him kickin' in air. There's a Curse on the place, that's what there is, Miss Hilda, an' I'd never have come next or nigh it but that herself shamed me to it."

"I hope Mr. De Lacy will escape the Curse, if there is one," said I.

"Och sure, if we can get him well an' marry him to Miss Essie the ould Curse 'll rowl off him like water off a duck's back. Sure he's not like a De Lacy at all. His father before him took the turn against the ould bad ways, an' himself here is the better man. If we can only get him well," he added.

There was a patter of rain in our faces, and the wood trembled before a fresh onslaught of wind.

"Glory be! I hope it's not going to rain again," said Mike. "If it does, there's no knowin' what'll be happenin'. I've never seen the country under such rain before. The year o' the big rain they might be callin' it."

"It's hard on you, Mike," I said sympathetically.

"It is. The seed's nigh washed out of the earth, an' I never knew as hard a season for the lambs. But 'tis

worse wid some others. I've a stout roof over me, thank God, an' fine foundations. If the rain comes on again there'll be many a little rickety cabin washed out to sea. The fear's on them already, the crathurs."

"The fear, Mike?"

"Aye, the fear. They're as frightened as sheep of somethin' that's goin' to happen, they don't know what. There's keenin' an' manifestations by night, they say, an' some say the dead rises out o' their graves night after night in the Bawn churchyard an' walks the world."

"Oh dear!" I said, shivering with infectious superstition, "I'd no idea there were such stories about."

"Well, there might be. They say some of the coffins have been washed out of the graves. The Bawn lies on a shelf o' land, as you know, Miss Hilda; an' people comin' on them things by night in the middle o' the road is apt to be onraisonable afraid."

"I should think so, indeed," said I.

"Father Cleary's in an' out among the people constant. All the sick an' aged people is wanting the last sacrament, like as if the world was comin' to an end. He spoke agin the fear that's on the people last Sunday from the altar, an' said it was a delusion of the Powers o' Darkness. But 'tis no use his talkin'. They say the priest has great power over heaven and hell, but there's a world that's nayther, nor yet earth, an' he can't put his *comether* on that."

Mike had entertained me but gloomily. I knew the superstitions among the people, superstitions that rose as naturally out of the damp earth as the mists and the vapours. Our valleys are hemmed in by immense and

lonely mountains, round which the clouds hang like a winding-sheet. Our people are fishers or small farmers, engaged for ever in the struggle to win a bare subsistence against all the forces of nature. A wet summer means death and famine by land. A wild winter the same doom by sea. No wonder that superstition flourishes, that the belief in fairy and ghost and wraith is wrought up so inextricably with the belief in saints and angels, that one could hardly pull up one without the other, the weeds without the golden corn.

It was weather to foster the Celtic melancholy, and if it were going to rain again then it might well be that calamity would follow.

But now we were at the Inch Farm, and presently in the roomy kitchen with its leaping wood fire. Mike and his son lifted the feather-bed bodily out of the donkey-cart and carried it to a bedroom where a fire had been lit. Esther watched all this hungrily as if she would have fain done everything herself.

Mrs. O'Flaherty meanwhile issued her orders like a general. Johnny was despatched for Dr. Rivers, and Esther and I were installed in big chairs before the fire. Our wet shoes and stockings were pulled off quickly and replaced by fleecy stockings of Mrs. O'Flaherty's own knitting.

While she was doing this her daughter Katie was serving up a meal of toasted bacon and eggs on a table at our elbow.

"Now eat, jewels," said our kind hostess, "while I look after my baby. Larry'll rowl yez back to Brandon on the side car as soon as ever Dr. Rivers has gone, an' the

sooner yez are back the better, for I'm sore afraid of the weary ould rain beginnin' again."

Then she bustled off to see to her baby, as she still called Harry De Lacy.

I was glad that Esther seemed content to leave him in her charge. Dr. Rivers had come before we were ready to start, having fortunately been at home when Johnny arrived. He was a much more efficient doctor than poor old Dr. Devine, and it was fortunate that when he left the army he had decided to settle down in our neighbourhood.

He came into the parlour to us after he had seen his patient.

"Well, Dr. Rivers, what do you think of him?" Esther said, jumping up as soon as the door opened.

"Oh, Miss Brandon, how do you do?" he said. "I see you have not lost interest in Mr. De Lacy."

He looked at her with his keen, man-of-the-world eyes.

"We are to be married, Dr. Rivers," said Esther, with a pathetic little air of dignity.

The doctor's face changed, and became full of sympathy.

"Oh, indeed!" he said; "no wonder you are anxious. There is nothing really the matter except that his vitality has been greatly reduced. What have they been doing to him since I put him out of my hands at Brandon, well on the way to recovery?"

Esther told him briefly of the young man's detention at Castle Angry, and of our rescue of him. He nodded at intervals during the telling.

"Ah! Miss Brandon," he said when she had finished, "one comes on strange happenings in one's profession, but this is like a tale out of a book, and no sober nineteenth-century business at all. Can you explain Sir Rupert's rancour against his grandson?"

"There is enmity of long standing between Sir Rupert and our family. He probably thought that if he could keep his grandson long enough from his friends the matter of our engagement would fall through."

"He would have slipped through his fingers very soon," said the physician grimly. "The man must be mad. If the lad had died of neglect and semi-starvation it would have been manslaughter at least. As it is," he said hastily, noticing that my sister had turned pale, "I believe you have saved him, Miss Brandon, though there is a lot of building-up required. Still, he is young, and happiness is a wonderful cure. You are leaving him in Mrs. O'Flaherty's care?"

"Till he is a little stronger. She is his foster-mother, and will watch over him with the utmost tenderness."

"And afterwards?"

"We will be married as soon as possible, and I shall take him abroad."

I wondered for the hundredth time at the power and resolution that had come into Esther with her love. Here she was arranging the future for herself and her lover as I should never have dared to do.

"Ah! that will be good," said Dr. Rivers. "Get him away from places that are painful by association, as soon as possible. Above all, keep him from any conflict with his grandfather."

"I don't think *he* will come into our lives again," said Esther, her face darkening. "If he should, we must protect ourselves at any cost. But at present you understand, Dr. Rivers, we are anxious to avoid publicity and scandal."

"The matter is safe with me, Miss Brandon," said the physician, bowing. "We have to hear so many strange things in the course of our profession that it would never do if we were not men of discretion."

"Thank you, Dr. Rivers," said my sister heartily, as he took leave of us.

Larry drove us home on a jaunting-car that reminded me of our equipage long ago at Annagassan Races. As we drove along, the mountains were gray with rain, and the first fine sweep of it came in our faces.

"How shall I get back to Annagower if it comes on to rain heavily?" said Esther, as we leant close together under an umbrella.

"Don't go back to-night, Essie," said I. "Sleep with me as in the old times. We can send word to Lady O'Brien that the weather has kept you."

"I should like to stay," she said.

"I have such wonderful things to tell you, Essie," I whispered, "*about myself*."

She looked at me with wonder.

"More literary successes, Hilda?" she asked.

"No, Essie, not literary successes."

"And what, then, Hilda?"

She turned straight round, letting the umbrella drip upon our heads, unnoticed, and looked into my eyes.

"Not that, Hilda?" she said, incredulously.

"And why not that?" I cried. "I suppose you think no one in the world has a lover but yourself."

"You darling!" she said; "and to think I can't hug you because of this umbrella!"

"You might as well, Essie, for the rain has been pouring down my spine in a perfect cascade for the last five minutes."

"Oh, I am sorry, you poor child! But here we are at Brandon. Find me a messenger for my godmother, Hilda, and I shall stay, and we shall have a dearer talk than ever we had in the old days. Oh, to think," she cried, as she furled, much to my relief, that most inefficient umbrella, "that all our dreams should have come true! Oh, how good God is, Hilda, how good God is!"

I looked at her glowing face in wonder. Clearly there was no misgiving for the future in it. Her joy and faith were infectious, and I too felt my heart singing a song, despite the rain and the gloom, and despite my memory of the worn and haggard young face of Esther's lover.



CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LAST OF CASTLE ANGRY.

WE captured little Tim Brophy from Brandon village, just as he turned away after delivering his basket of eggs at the kitchen-door, and kept him till Esther's note to her godmother was written.

"Run fast, Tim," said Esther as she gave it to him, "or you'll be drenched before you get back."

"Never fear, Miss Esther," he answered cheerfully. "I'll be back before I'm gone."

And, to judge by the rate of speed at which his bare legs and red head disappeared, he would keep his word in the spirit, if not in the letter.

We sat with Aline in her lamp-lit room over the tea-cups, and Esther made her confession, even to the events of the morning.

Poor Aline looked bewildered as the tale proceeded.

"Well," she said at last, "you seem to have been making your own life, Esther. I hope you are going to be happy, my dear, but"—with a little hurt look—"I am so much in the dark nowadays. First it is Freda, and now Essie who has a story to tell, and I am the last to hear it. Perhaps it is my own fault that I do not understand you girls."

Now at this I had a great qualm, for here was I, too, keeping Aline in the dark.

"It is only because they had troubles, darling, that they kept secrets from you," I cried impulsively. "You have always been carrying the whole of us on your shoulders, and have had so much trouble already."

And with that I burst out with the whole story of my own lover, which I had indeed intended to tell no one but Esther, until he returned. When I had finished, Aline kissed me and then laughed.

"It is too much for one day, children," she said. "Perhaps even now the twins are on their way to me with news of their betrothal."

Then I knew she was pleased that I was to marry Lance. Indeed, when did she ever think of anything but our happiness? To both Esther and myself she was full of sweetness, but I could see that she was anxious lest further trouble should be on its way to poor Essie, though she said frankly that she believed Harry De Lacy was as good as his grandfather was wicked. Still, his delicate health troubled her, and I imagine that in her heart she dreaded further evil from Sir Rupert.

While we sat in the white-panelled room we heard the rain beating sharply against the windows, and as the evening darkened came the rumbling of distant thunder. Aline sent hurriedly to know if all her little flock was safe indoors. Yes, the boys were amicably engaged in teaching the twins to play chess, in the comfortable downstairs room which belonged to the younger ones, and which we seldom invaded.

"Ah!" said Aline with a sigh, "we ought to be thankful,

this inclement night, that the tempest threatens no head dear to us."

We said nothing, for we knew she was thinking of Pierce, who had been out in the wind and rain so many comfortless nights, and who was now safe and warm within his Father's House.

After dinner we sat in the dining-room till nearly bedtime, all of us together. Outside, the rain still poured, and there was an incessant flashing of lightning across the drenched country, so that at last we drew the heavy curtains to shut it out.

The boys had heard the tales that Mike O'Flaherty had been telling me, and eerier stories still. One was that Mathew Hanrahan, a sad-faced widower whom we all knew, had seen his own corpse brought to his door by Brandon river. Another was that when they were waking a young woman over by Barnacree side, the tide had risen and carried the dead with it out to sea.

"I wish we had the money," said Hugh the practical, "to see to those old upper rooms. The rain is in them to-night, I daresay, and some night of high wind we shall have the chimneys through the floors down upon our beds."

"Ah! dear boy," said Aline, "many things come to Brandon, but never money: I believe we shall be the poor Brandons to the end of time."

"And to think," grumbled Donald, "that there are chests full of gold in Angry—at least so the poor people say—which ought to be ours by right!"

"We don't grudge Sir Rupert his gold," said Aline with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Not if the other things must be thrown in, you mean," said Hugh shrewdly. "But, Aline, we—Donald and I—are going to save the old place yet."

"But how, dear boy? You don't know how much money we should want."

Hugh, who had been lying on the hearth-rug, stretched himself all his young length, with a suggestion of a creature cramped for space.

"You must let us go, Aline. We are no longer children, and there are fortunes to be made in the world."

"But where would you go?" asked Aline in a hushed voice. Her face had grown a little paler, but she hardly seemed surprised. Perhaps she had been dreading some such thing for long.

"We will go to Africa to Mr. Desmond. He told us long ago that he should have room for us when we were men. Now we are men, and he has room for us. He has opened up a new diamond field, as you would know, Aline, if you ever read the newspapers."

"Must both of you go?" said Aline in the same hushed voice. "We are only women and children here, and Pierce left us to you, Hugh."

"There is nothing for a man to do here, and we will stick together till we bring home the ransom of Brandon in our hands. We have friends now. It is not as in the old days when we knew no one. There is the General, and there is Captain MacNeill always at hand."

Hugh looked at me curiously. It made me suspect that he knew something of the state of affairs.

"They will befriend you," he went on earnestly. "Captain MacNeill knows, and thinks we are right. The

General wanted me to go into the army, but that means cadging on him, and I prefer, and so does Donald, to make our fortunes."

"How do you know Mr. Desmond will help you?" said Aline. "He helped Pierce, and they quarrelled."

"He would not remember it against us," cried the boys together.

"He is coming home, Aline," said Donald, suddenly turning all the contents of a miscellaneous pocket on to the table.

There were five pocket-handkerchiefs, a clay pipe, a roll of string, a pocket-knife, some loose matches, a piece of shag tobacco, a book of flies, and several more or less dilapidated wads of paper. He smoothed out one of these with his hands, and pointed to the conclusion of a paragraph.

"It is rumoured that Mr. Desmond will spend a portion of next summer in revisiting his native country."

He read it aloud, and then handed it to Aline.

"We have known it for some time," said Hugh. "We shall wait till he comes, and ask him if he has room for us. If he says he has not, we must go somewhere on our own hook. We want no more from him, Aline, than anyone else, but it would be less lonesome if he were our friend."

"The old nest will soon be deserted," said Aline, looking round on us. "I shall be like the wood-pigeon we saw last summer after the hawk had eaten her mate and the young ones, and she used to call them about the empty nest."

"The hawk is the world, Aline," I said, "but the world

shall not swallow us. We shall be with you, and the boys will return."

"Ah, yes!" said Aline, "they will return, perhaps."

She got up suddenly and went out of the room, and after a little while, when we went to look for her we found she had gone to her room for the night.

We went to bed somewhat melancholy in consequence, and I think Esther and I were glad to have each other's company. With the night the wind had risen, and as we went along the corridors to our bedrooms it raved and shrieked outside, and whistled through every key-hole as though it were trying to drown the noise of the thunder. We scurried fast along the upper floor, for the lightning made the well of the staircase as light as day with its almost incessant flashing, and the ragged tapestry on the walls trailed out like banners, and flapped in our faces as we passed by.

When we had reached my room at last, I ran to draw the curtains and shut out the night. Very vividly in the white lightning I saw the sister mountains of Brandon and Angry, for now that the trees were leafless the latter showed its frowning head.

I paused an instant to gaze at them, and as I did so the lightning passed, leaving a gulf of profound blackness. The side of Castle Angry was towards us as we stood, and I could see the flashing of a light travelling apparently from floor to floor.

"Come, Esther, and look," I said. "There is a light in Angry. I wonder how they are feeling over there about the escape of the captive."

Esther looked with me an instant, and then cried to me

to come away, for a zigzag of blue lightning smote the head of Angry, and then seemed to leap down the chasm. As the thunder rattled and roared behind it, I closed the shutters and then stirred the fire, so that the room was cheerful.

We went to bed after praying for the poor people who were in danger from the night's storm. We lay awake for long talking of our own affairs, and of the boys and their resolution. Esther was the first to sleep. I looked at her where she lay in the shadow, smiling in sleep—for I had kept a lamp burning to mitigate the glare of the lightning,—and I thanked God for the peace the events of the last twenty-four hours had brought to my sister's heart. Mine, too, felt at peace about her and her love. I remember thinking, the last thing before I slept, that God was stronger than Sir Rupert De Lacy, and the thought sent me asleep smiling.

When I awoke the room was dark, for the lamp had died down. Paudeen, who always sleeps on a mat at my door, was howling in the most melancholy way, but, full of horror and omen as a dog's howl is, I did not think it was that which had wakened me. For a second or two I lay dazed and terrified. Then Esther stirred at my side.

"Oh, Hilda! what is it?" she cried. "What a horrible night it is! I think something terrible has happened."

"I will see," said I, getting out of bed in the dark.

As my foot touched the floor Paudeen again raised his voice. I ran to the door and opened it, and spoke to the

dog. He was trembling as he came in fawning against my feet. The house outside was full of the gray dawn, and on the glass skylight overhead I heard the rain streaming.

But another sound than the rain was in our ears. There was a roaring as of many waters, a groaning and rumbling as of the earth itself. One could hardly say if it was near or distant; it seemed all about us.

I opened the shutters with a hand that shook.

"Oh, Hilda," moaned Esther again, "what has happened? It is like the Day of Judgment."

"Something has happened," I replied, "or is happening, but old Brandon is safe. I'm afraid there must be a great flood, or an earthquake, or something, but we are firm. There is not a tremor in the house."

I took up Paudeen, who was shivering miserably, and put him into my bed.

"There, you two poor frightened things," said I, "comfort each other."

But I did not feel at all so brave myself. Just then there came a knocking at the door, and Hugh's voice.

"Are you awake, Hilda?"

"Yes, and up," I answered. "What has happened?"

"I can't tell yet, except that I believe we are safe. Dress yourself and come out till we see. The rain is leaving off."

Esther and I dressed ourselves hastily, and joined the two boys. As we went downstairs the twins came flying after us, and we met Oona coming up from below.

"Go up and see if Miss Aline is awake," I said to her. "We must not leave an empty house."

"Don't go into any danger, childher," she said with a groan, and then broke out into a string of *wirra wirra-rasthrues*.

But Donald, who had been the first to open the hall door, came running back.

"There is a flood or something over at Angry," he cried. "Stay back, you young ones, you can look from the windows; but there may be help needed, and men. Keep them at home, Hilda," he said to me.

"No," I said, "I will go to watch over you boys. I dare not let you go alone."

"It is the bog! it is the bog!" cried Oona suddenly; "an' there are little houses in its thrack, an' little childher, an' men an' women! Oh, Lord, have mercy! The time the bog was out at Docra five-an'-forty years ago, my own sister and her three little childher were among the dead!"

She flung her apron over her head, and began rocking herself to and fro. I pushed her into a great chair that was in the hall.

"There, you children," I said to the twins, "stay with Oona, and comfort her. And here, keep Pauden; he must not follow us."

We shut the door on the disappointed twins, and hurried away down the long avenue. The rain had indeed stopped, and the air was sweet with a salt breeze from the sea. Every minute the day grew clearer about us, and the morning would have been sweet and gentle enough, save for the menace and fear of the roaring bog.

By the time we had reached the road it was day, and we came upon groups of men, women, and children, all

hurrying one way, and that way towards Angry. We joined the hurrying groups with a hasty word or two.

"'Tis the bog, sure enough," said a woman to me, "an' in its track to the sea there is many a cabin. Lord, have mercy!"

All this time we were under the walls and the trees of Brandon Woods. Now we emerged from them, and came on the climbing road that winds between Brandon and Angry, skirting the slope of Brandon. As we reached it we saw people standing in motionless groups, all looking towards Angry. Below them a little way the bog was widening like a sea.

"There is nothing to be done here," I heard Hugh cry suddenly. "But there is time yet to warn some of the people that the bog is coming. Here, you boys that are fast runners, cut across the mountain for your lives to Docra and Doorish. And any of you men that have a horse, mount it and ride to Adeelish and Araglen, and let them know the bog is out."

The crowd scattered in many directions, and as I saw the lads, fleet as mountain goats, speed up the pathways, I felt sure that by my brother's presence of mind many lives would be saved.

"Ropes and ladders may be useful," he said, "but not here. I think there is nothing to be done here."

From where we were we could see Angry Woods, but not Castle Angry, and the woods were tossing as in a tempest, though there was no wind. Hitherto the woods had offered some barrier to the bog. Now, as we watched, they bent one way, as though they would lay their faces against the earth, and then with a huge groaning and

tearing, a great slice of the centre of the woods began to move.

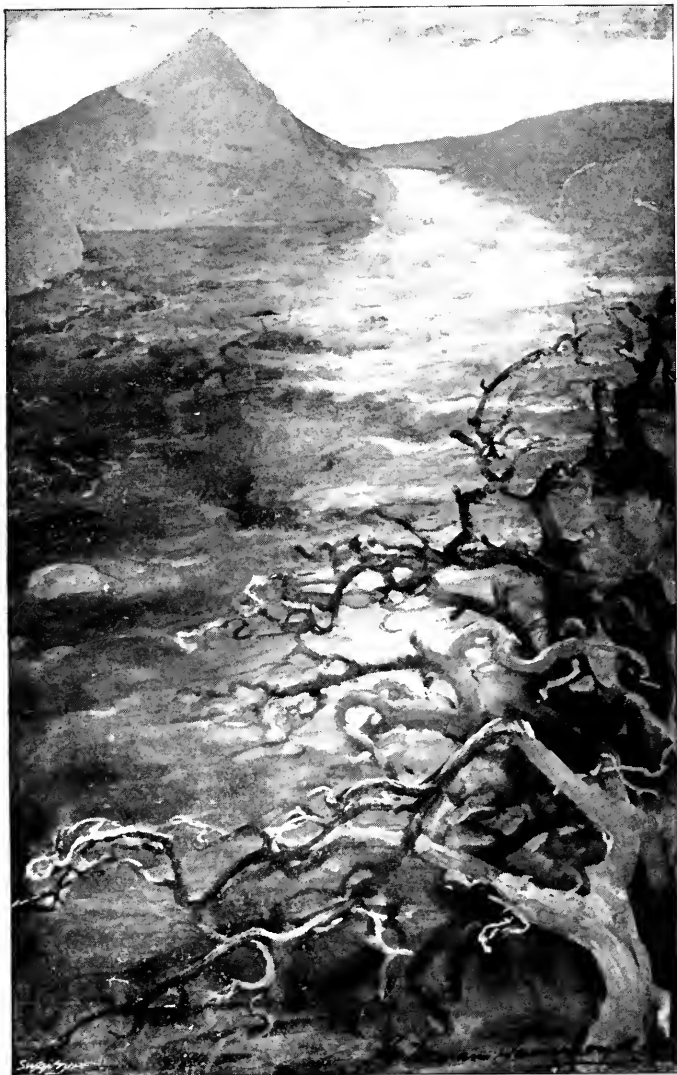
We who saw this terrible sight ran back aghast at the terror of it. We climbed Brandon higher and higher, though we were already far out of reach of the bog. Then at last we flung ourselves on the sward exhausted, and some of us gained courage to turn and look. I found Esther by my side. Hugh and Donald had vanished. They were seeing what could be done to save life, I knew, as Brandons ought, and I would not be afraid for them.

But Castle Angry! where was it? I stood up in the cold white light, that showed everything in sharp lights and shadows, and looked with amazement upon Angry Mountain. The ravine was full of the bog, moving, a great black sluggish mass. Now that the wood no longer held it back, it came on narrower and swifter. Below us in the valley there was an inextricable mass of tree-trunks, mixed up with debris of all kinds. But where Castle Angry had lifted its gateway with the two square towers there was nothing now, nothing but bog.

I seized Esther's hand and pointed.

"Look!" I cried; "see how God saves the innocent! If the bog had moved a day earlier, where would Harry De Lacy have been?"

And now something more terrible than all happened, for as the flood came down from Angry through the gap in the wood, someone cried out that there was a man or a body floating. We were all women, and panic-stricken, yet with some vague feeling that life might be saved, we turned back as impetuously as we had come, and ran, out-



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“THE RAVINE WAS FULL OF THE BOG, MOVING, A GREAT BLACK
SLUGGISH MASS.”

stripping each other, as near as we dared to where the bog had filled the valley, as though it were the bed of a river. Then we waited.

And presently there came down with the bog the wretch we were unable to help. He was crouched on something, a plank, or a tree-trunk, what it was we could not rightly see, for all was equal in the black bog-water. There he sat, as one astride a raft, an awful image of fear.

Nor was he alone. Facing him on his raft was a great yellow dog, with bared fangs and bristling hair, as though terror had driven the creature mad.

"It is Gaskin!" said someone, and then a moan broke from the crowd, but no one spoke, though many there had cause to curse his name. The doomed wretch gave us a horrible glare of appeal as he swept by, and his raft, caught by the current, swayed this way and that way. But we could do nothing. He was in mid-stream, and so he and the dog that was called Venom swung on with the bog, round the foot of Brandon Mountain, and out of the sight of man.



CHAPTER XXX.

WEDDING-BELLS.

THE bog-slide claimed but one other victim, and that was Thomas Hanrahan, the widower, in his Inoe cabin over to Barnagee. His "fetch" had not come to him for nothing. The inhabitants of the other cabins that stood in its path had received timely warning, or it had skirted them. Many wonderful escapes were recorded, for the bog had crept in and out like a snake, sometimes almost washing the threshold of a house, and sparing it; and again it had widened to swallow the bits of hillside farms that had been made out of blood and sweat.

It took its heavy toll of cattle, and crops, and sheep, and of little thatched cabins; but its human sacrifice was small—just Thomas Hanrahan and these two men up at Castle Angry. The long *détour* it had to make round the foot of our noble mountain had saved many lives. The hill had stood guarding the people till the warning reached them, and now we Brandons held in greater love, if that were possible, the beneficent mountain which was called by our name.

Thomas Hanrahan's body was flung up by the bog after some days, and received Christian burial; but of

Sir Rupert and his bailiff nothing was ever heard. The bog had swallowed them, and when at last it stopped moving and was quiet, the ravine over which Castle Angry had stood was all a quaking bog, a menace to any living thing that should set foot upon it. With Castle Angry went all Sir Rupert's gold, the immense price which he had received long ago from the English company for the mines, of which he had robbed us Brandons. I, for one, did not grudge the evil gold to the bog.

And so Harry De Lacy entered into his patrimony—a modest one now—of Angry Mountain and a score of rack-rented farms.

“We shall be as poor as church mice,” said Esther with dancing eyes, and red roses of happiness blown into her cheeks, “but for all that we shall make the people forget that once they hated our name.”

She was not a Brandon to be afraid of poverty, though her estate would be wealth compared with what we had known all our days. Harry De Lacy was growing stronger every day, and the air of beauty and race which he had worn when first we saw him was coming back to him now. As Mrs. O'Flaherty said, they would be the handsomest couple ever seen in our countryside, “and that,” added the good woman, “meaning no disrespect to the handsome Brandons.”

They were to be married on the threshold of Lent, and to have their honeymoon in Paris, where, after a little interval, Lady O'Brien, with her faithful Martha, would join them for the Easter in Rome. It was a lovely mild February, with the snowdrops in snowdrifts under the trees in Brandon woods and primroses in sheltered places

with troops of celandines, violets, and marsh marigolds. Esther was not to have a flowerless wedding.

It was wonderful how Harry De Lacy recovered under the influence of happiness. The shock of the manner of his grandfather's death was but a passing one, and with his marriage waiting upon his convalescence it was wonderful what strides he made towards recovery. Dr. Rivers' pride and pleasure in his patient's progress lifted up our hearts, who had been anxious about Harry De Lacy's ultimate recovery.

"He has a constitution," the doctor pronounced, "and rare recuperative powers. I should never have dared to hope for so rapid a recovery."

So, after all, thank God, Esther was not to have a delicate husband, with the martyrdom of fear which that would have meant to her.

It was only long afterwards that Esther gathered bit by bit, and told me, something of the circumstances of Harry De Lacy's imprisonment, for imprisonment it had been, till he was so weak that his bonds might safely be relaxed. He had been ill before that day when Lady O'Brien had sent for Sir Rupert. After that he found himself a prisoner, with Gaskin for his jailer; and the wretch hated him since his chastisement for his cruelty to the dogs.

For many weeks Harry had lain, as he thought, slowly dying and half-delirious from want of proper food and care. In those weeks he was conscious, like one in a dream, of Gaskin's malevolent visage as he flung him food and drink twice a day. It might be years, he said, during which he had watched the short winter daylight

creep up the walls and linger and vanish, and had endured the feverish torments of the night.

Once he had thought he heard voices beside his bed.

"'Tis only to loosen a plank 'idout on the lobby," said one, "an' lave the door open, an' before he knows where he is he'll be on the stones o' the hall below."

The speech was followed by a crackling laugh, and the speaker rubbed his hands in glee.

Then another voice, harsh and deep, answered:

"No tricks, Gaskin, or by heavens, man, I'll tie you up like a dog in a sack and fling you to the hounds. Venom would make short work of your bones."

Then the other voice answered surlily:

"'Tis all the wan thing, only quicker, as lavin' him die in his bed."

"And who said he was to die, you scoundrel? If he dies through any fault of yours, so much the worse for you!" growled the other voice.

And then the speakers drifted off into the phantasmagoria of dreams and terrors which were the background of the sick man's life.

After that he conceived a resolution to save himself. Instead of rejecting the food that was brought him he forced himself to eat, and while feigning unconsciousness or sleep when Gaskin came with the food, he held himself in readiness to guard his life, so far as his feeble strength would allow, if it were threatened, and watched for an opportunity to deliver himself out of the hands of his would-be murderer. In time Gaskin relaxed his guard of the door, believing his prisoner past helping himself, and this was Harry's opportunity.

He had followed Gaskin one night, and listened to him and Sir Rupert talking over their whisky. From their talk he gathered that they would be at a distance on a certain day—that day of January on which, indeed, we effected his rescue. But for the happy accident of Johnny O’Flaherty’s venturous approach to Castle Angry he would have made the attempt to escape unaided, and would probably have died under the rains if he had not been recaptured.

It comforted him to think in those days that his grandfather had stood between him and death, for he was sure that it was only Gaskin’s fear of Sir Rupert had held his hand from murder. To me it seemed but a small compunction in the wicked old man, and I could not help believing it a part of his pride that found it insufferable for a worm like Gaskin to lift its head against one of his blood. If Harry had died in his bed at Castle Angry it seemed to me that it would have been murder, just as much as if he had crashed through the upper floor, as Gaskin had wished it, on to the flags of the hall. But the quality of gentleness which Harry De Lacy must have inherited from his other saintly old grandfather, and which, I know now, implies no lack of courage and true manliness, makes it easy to him to forgive Sir Rupert, and even to regret him a little after all.

They were married very quietly one morning by Mr. Benson, in our old parish church. Esther had wanted to wear her travelling dress, but Lady O’Brien would not have it.

“You will be the handsomest bride in this part of the country,” she said, “since I stood up with poor Peter.

Hilda there won't be a patch on you, meaning no disrespect to her. And you sha'n't be defrauded of your bridal glories. 'Twould be a shame to me for ever if I let you."

So Esther had white poplin, with a train of white velvet, and the poplin delightfully sprigged with silver shamrocks. And I, the solitary bridesmaid, had also my frock from Paris, a creamy embroidered muslin trimmed with lace, which looked the embodiment of simplicity, but I am sure cost a very pretty penny for all that. It was Lady O'Brien's gift, and I cried out when she gave it to me that I would keep it against my wedding, but she said no, that I should have a wedding-dress of my own, and that she was to give it to me.

"What," said she, "are you to give my daughter Esther rubies, and a minx like you be too proud to accept from an old woman a tuppenny-ha'penny silk frock."

So I laughed and said I wasn't a minx, and would try to swallow the frock.

Lance and I were to be married at Whitsuntide. I would not have it earlier, because I could not bear that we should all hurry away from Aline. He grumbled a good deal because I would not fix the same day as Esther's for our wedding, which most auspiciously was Valentine's Day, and after he had seen me in my bridesmaid's frock he was more unwilling to wait than ever.

Still, as I put it to him, since we saw each other every day, and as he and the General were so busy over those mysterious preparations at Rose Hill, into which I was never allowed to pry, the time would pass quickly enough. And it really did. We were going to have husband-

and-wife days all our life, and I wanted my share of "loving" days like any other girl, and so I had them in spite of my grumbling lover.

I wish I could tell you something of the state of felicity in which the General spent those days. I should have thought Rose Hill lovely enough for anybody, but the General said that when he was fitting it up—only last autumn—he had never thought of such a person as a bride, and it seemed there was a lot to be done for a bride.

I used not to know whether to laugh or cry over the General's diplomacy in those days. I was supposed to be in the dark entirely about the suite of rooms which was being prepared for me, but really I knew beforehand almost everything they would contain. The General's way of finding out my tastes was to describe minutely a wall-paper, a chintz, a carpet, or a piece of furniture, and ask me if I thought such a thing would "please a lady". His craft would not have imposed on Paudeen; but for all that those rooms were going to be a tremendous surprise to me.

I was always wondering in those days—indeed I wonder still—what those two men could see in me to be so absorbed in and delighted over. Esther's beauty now, or Aline's goodness, I could understand exciting such enthusiasm,—but Hilda! Ah, well, it is a great thing that people have such tender delusions about us; and surely no one could have loved better than I. My love was adequate if nothing else was, and that was the thought that used to comfort me.

The time really flew round till it was May, and within a week or two of our marriage. Whitsuntide fell in

May, and though people say it is an unlucky month for a marriage, I was not daunted. As I said to Lance, I was more afraid of keeping him waiting longer than of the ill-luck, to which he replied that if I suggested a further postponement he'd be obliged to abduct me.

Early in May our bride and bridegroom came home. Lady O'Brien and Martha had preceded them by about a fortnight, and had been very busy with preparations, for they were to live at Annagower. Harry De Lacy was going to farm a large slice of land about Angry. Poor land that even our peasant makers-of-land would despair of, but he was full of theories and full of hope, and it was pleasant to see him beginning his new life with such energy, and Esther's boundless faith in him. After all, their poverty proved to be quite relative, because between them they possessed an income of nearly a thousand a year, which is affluence in our quiet country, whatever it might be in London. Lady O'Brien had treated Esther exactly like a daughter, saying that she preferred to ensure her future against an old woman's whims.

"For who knows," she said in her whimsical way, "but I might forget Peter after all those years, and go off and marry some fellow, and make a fool of myself over him."

In this season of regeneration, a full share of new brightness had come to our dear old friend. Her rheumatism she said she had danced off at Essie's wedding, and when one of the literal twins gravely remarked that there had been no dancing, Lady O'Brien answered her that it was only because she had not had eyes to see.

Meanwhile I had been getting ready my very modest

trousseau. Aline had found a little hoard somewhere for that, and as we live in the centre of a sewing industry, my things were fine and delicate as heart could desire. My frocks were few but pretty, and I was satisfied with them, though I knew that Lance's fingers were tingling against the day when he should bestow on me Parisian gowns and bonnets. I told him I wouldn't repay fine dressing, that it would but accentuate my insignificance, at which he would smile darkly.

My wedding gown only arrived from Annagower the evening before my wedding, and when it had been carried up to my bedroom, and Martha, who was in charge, spread its glories upon the bed, there it was, to my amazement, a replica of Esther's splendour. Accompanying it was a veil, shoes and gloves, and a tiny wreath of orange blossoms. There was no full-dress rehearsal. Martha was to stay the night in order to assist at my toilette in the morning, lest anything should require readjusting. And though I was brave enough to marry in May, I did not see the good of doubly defying the superstitious by trying on my wedding dress beforehand.

No bride ever had so many dressers before. I am sure the business-like Martha was rather irritated by having so many eager assistants, though she was too admirable to betray it. All my sisters, except Freda, were about me, and Lady O'Brien was sitting in state downstairs, while the boys waited in the corridor, getting in the way of the twins, who were darting up and down incessantly on all manner of unnecessary messages.

When I was quite dressed, even to the General's diamond star, and Aline's pearl brooch, to say nothing of

my bridegroom's two splendid bracelets, Esther stepped forward, and, kissing me, clasped about my neck a lovely string of pearls with a diamond clasp. I recognized them as those her godmother had given her the night of her first ball, and cried out in protest, but she laughed and kissed me, saying they would become me better than her, for whom rubies of all things were the very gems.

So Lance did not see my splendour till we met at the altar.

Of course he was delighted, but then he is always delighted, and I am not sure that he doesn't like me better in the old frock in which he first found me seated on the steps in Rose Hill library; or in a pink gingham, which reminds him, he says, of me lying all crumpled up in the ditch the day of Annagassan Races.

One of my thoughts when I stood at the altar was whether Pierce in heaven knew of my happiness, and rejoiced in it, but I am sure he did. I said so to Aline afterwards, when I was alone with her for a minute, and she kissed me closely, and said she was sure he knew, and then she said sweetly that she was so happy in the two dear new brothers we had given her.

So, if I had tears in my eyes as our carriage drove off, as Lance said I had, they were tears of pure happiness and thanksgiving.

Oona always said that if Heaven meant a girl to be married, the husband would find her, though she were hidden in a bandbox. And here were we two girls fulfilling that wise saying of hers, and marrying the dearest of husbands after living the life of nuns. I said something of this to Oona, and she was well pleased.

“ You couldn’t have done better, Miss Hilda,” she said, “ nor yet Miss Esther. The people do be saying they couldn’t pick between your gentlemen, for though Sir Harry is as handsome as a picture, the Captain’s that big an’ strong an’ kind-looking.”

So everybody seemed to smile upon our happiness.





CHAPTER XXXI.

ONCE AND FOR EVER.

FREDA had not been able to come to our wedding, to my grief. She had now been six months with Mrs. Des Vœux in Devonshire, and seemed at last to have found quiet happiness. She wrote to us that the old blind lady treated her more like a daughter than a dependant, and if she did not come to our wedding it was because she could not bear to leave her in her darkness, even for a little while.

So after Lance and I had been three weeks at Kilarney, which is, I am sure, the most beautiful place on earth, I acquiesced cheerfully when he suggested that we should cross to England from Cork, and wander about Cornwall and Devonshire for the remaining weeks of our honeymoon.

"Oh, yes!" I said, "and we shall see Freda, shall we not? I have wished it of all things."

For somehow I had felt sad about Freda being outside our happiness during those momentous times at Brandon.

"As you will, my sweetheart," Lance had said, as he would have said, I believe, to any proposal of mine that did not involve our separation.

I wrote to Freda to tell her of our plans, and by return

of post I had a letter from her so full of delight, that I felt how her distance from us all must have hurt her during those years. She wrote:

It is the most ideal arrangement, for Mary Vincent and Jacky are to be here in June. But as for going to an inn, no such thing. There is a little summer cottage attached to this house, and just hidden in the combe beyond the garden-hedge. Mrs. Des Vœux has invited Mary and my boy to spend the summer there, and when she heard of you, she begged me to ask if you two would make use of it—Mary will take care of you both—you know how admirable a housekeeper she is, and she is the soul of discretion. Let me know when you will come. I am longing to see you and to meet my new brother.

We arrived at Wyncombe one lovely June afternoon and found our cottage a very delicious place. It was built of wood with a verandah running around it, and the whole hidden in creepers. The little valley was wooded to the top, and in front of the cottage door ran a little brown stream which might have been one of our trout streams at home. There was a small boy of a very martial aspect standing a-straddle in the trellised porch when we arrived, with an unhappy-looking fat puppy pressed tightly to his breast.

"Hello!" he hailed us. "Where is Old Soldier? This is a soldier dog, Moustache is his name. He has to learn to shoulder arms, but he always rolls over."

"Old Soldier didn't come this time, Jacky," said I.

"You are to come to see him in Ireland. But this is his son, who is also a soldier."

"He has got no medals," said Jacky, as he shook hands gravely. "Are you greedy at your dinner, or will you not have your hands washed?"

From this speech I learned that Jacky had been insubordinate, and had perhaps lost a stripe or two since coming to Wyncombe.

Half the cottage was allotted to us, and I discovered very soon that so excellent was Mrs. Vincent's discipline that even Master Jacky respected our frontier, and was only in evidence when desired—admirable small boy! However, Lance capitulated to Jacky the minute he saw him, so I expected to have him tolerably often in evidence.

Freda came over to dinner in a pretty black gauze dinner-gown, and looked very fair and sweet and comely. She brought a message from Mrs. Des Vœux that she thought we would be happier together this one evening, but that she hoped we would come over and dine the next day, and excuse her not calling first.

My sister was delightfully changed for the better. She seemed brimming over with quiet happiness, and I could not wonder. After her hard and disillusioning experiences of the world, after the stony streets of London, it must have been indeed delicious to be in this quiet place, surrounded by everything that kindness and consideration could give.

After dinner we sat in the verandah and talked. Lance romped on the grass with Jacky and Moustache, who seemed a very jolly little puppy when he wasn't

half stifled by his master's loving embraces. However, as Freda said, a dog will stand a good deal done in the way of love. Mrs. Vincent had gone over to keep Mrs. Des Vœux company, so we had a long quiet comfortable chat, lounging in our rocking-chairs, and with nothing to disturb us but the singing of the birds and the shrill laughter of Freda's boy.

I had a long story to tell her, the details of all that had been happening to us at Brandon. Then when I had done, I had to hear all about her since she came to Wyncombe.

"When you see Mrs. Des Vœux," she said, "you will know what an angel she is. She has it written in her dear face. She has had such sorrows, Hilda, but they have only made her more heavenly. It is a privilege to be with her, and though she takes occasion many times in the day to send me out, for she is obliged to sit in a darkened room,—she is not altogether blind, you know,—yet I always come back into the shadows with joy. I have nothing to do but read to and write for her; she has many friends, out in the world, as she says, who are always needing her counsel and comfort. Yes, and I have to gather her roses, as Lady A—— said. Wait till you see our roses, Hilda. You will be out of conceit with Rose Hill."

"Never!" I cried.

"Ah, well!" she laughed, "I suppose immortal roses have grown there for you."

Then she told me how Mrs. Des Vœux's only son had died in India.

"Her grief," she went on, "has made her profoundly

tender and sympathetic to all mothers. She wanted me to have Jacky under the same roof with me, but I was afraid his high spirits might oppress her sometimes. Still, she loves to have him with her now and again, and he behaves sweetly to her; and would you believe it, Hilda, she has offered me the cottage for him and Mary to make their home there? She put it so delicately, that they would keep up the place and save it from going to pieces with damp during the winter. I shall be the happiest woman on earth. Think of this place for Jacky after Parson's Green!"

"You accepted, of course?"

"I cried with joy. She only suggested it this evening before I came over, and I was already so full of joy at the prospect of seeing you. 'Ask your friend Mrs. Vincent, my dear,' she said in her humble way, 'if she will do me this great favour.' And I just took up her dear old hands and kissed them, and said, 'You shall ask her yourself when she comes this evening, and see what she will say.'"

"She will like it, Freda?"

"Like it!" cried Freda. "It is what we have dreamt of for our old age! We used to plan that when Jacky was grown up and a successful man, he would make just such provision for us two old ladies. But that it should come while Jacky was still a little boy and dependent on us, with years of his childhood still to come,—we never dreamt of such happiness as that."

"You poor dear!" said I, "the Hazeldines ought to have done that for you. It would not have cost them much."

"Oh, that reminds me!" said Freda. "Since I came here Lady Hazeldine heard from a friend of Mrs. Des Vœux of me and what I was doing. She wrote me, for her, a really humble letter, saying how shocked she and Sir John had been to learn that their son's widow had had to earn her bread and her child's. She implored me to forgive anything that had occurred between us, and to come to them to live with them, or to make arrangements to live independently as I would. Poor woman, when I read the letter all resentment faded out of my heart.

"I explained that I couldn't leave Mrs. Des Vœux just at present, but it was love which kept me, not servitude. I said I was happier in my working life, and did not feel now that I should care to give it up, but said I would come whenever Mrs. Des Vœux could spare me. I am going to them in the autumn for a while with Jacky, while Mary takes my place with Mrs. Des Vœux. I am very glad to be at peace with Jim's people. The difference between us has hurt me all those years."

"They will be delighted with Jacky," I said.

"Lady Hazeldine has seen him. She drove down to Parson's Green as soon as she heard where he was, making, I've no doubt, a fine sensation for Grove Avenue with her carriage and pair. She cried over Jacky, poor woman, and he, ungrateful monkey, just wriggled out of her embrace. 'You aren't my grandmother,' he said flatly. 'I've a mother and a Gran. (that's what he calls Mary when he doesn't call her by her Christian name) and lots of aunties, but I've no grandmother.' Poor Mary was horrified, and tried to persuade him of the relationship,

but he stuck to his own opinion. 'If you were my grandmother,' he said, 'you'd have taken me for a ride in that carriage long ago.' The poor woman felt it acutely. She wrote and told me about it. *Your boy was right, Freda, she wrote, that is the sting of it. But for Jim's sake you will teach him to love and forgive me.*"

"Oh, poor woman," said I, "I am sorry for her!"

"So am I," said Freda, "but Jacky is terribly unpromising. And how strange it is that the Hazeldines' good-will comes to me now that I am independent of it! Last year, or the year before, it would have meant deliverance."

The next evening we went over to the Court to dine. It was a delightful house in the midst of rose gardens, and when we had gone into the shaded drawing-room, we found roses everywhere, in bowls and vases and baskets, so that the room was as sweet as the sunny garden. In the midst of all the sweetness sat the dear white-haired old lady, with her thin hands in the lap of her black silk gown, and her figure wearing the ineffable look of patience that comes to the blind. Freda introduced us, and then the dear old lady made me sit beside her, and held my hand and patted it.

"I can't make out your face, my dear," she said, "but I always think I can imagine what people are like from touching them. Even your hands tell me you are fair and soft and sweet like your dear sister, who has done so much to brighten my life since she came."

Then she held Lance's hand a minute and congratulated us so sweetly on our happiness, and read us a little homily

on the married life, to which we both listened as reverently as if we were in church.

Jacky, who had been specially invited, arrived just then looking very spruce. He came in with the most sedate little air imaginable, and getting round to Mrs. Des Vœux's side, bent down and kissed her hand.

"You dear boy," she said, putting her hand on his curls, "where did you learn your pretty, pretty ways?"

"It is Jacky's way of expressing affection," said Freda proudly, "and no one taught him. It just came to him untaught."

Beyond the shaded drawing-room we saw the dining-table through an arch with looped-up curtains. Candles with green shades were lit among the profusion of roses, though it was still broad sunlight.

"You won't mind, my dears," said the old lady, "my not dining with you. I can't stand the light nor condemn others to darkness, so I have a little wheeled table brought in here with my dinner."

Just then a tall dark gentleman stepped in by the French window, as if he were very much at home.

"Hello, Trefusis!" cried Jacky, from where he was squatted on the ground by Mrs. Des Vœux.

"Is that you, John, my dear?" said Mrs. Des Vœux, as he came up to her chair.

Then she introduced him to us as "Our squire and neighbour, Mr. Trefusis."

I was rather surprised, for Freda hadn't said a word of this neighbour, who was evidently very much at home in the house.

Mr. Trefusis dined with us, and we found him ex-

tremely pleasant. He was a grave, thoughtful-looking man, with melancholy eyes. Freda told us afterwards that he had lost his wife in the first year of their marriage, and had since spent a life absorbed in study and reading.

"He is much younger than he looks," she added.

I could quite believe that, if it were only because of the terms of camaraderie on which he was with Jacky. Jacky, indeed, treated him precisely as if they were of an age, and it was delightful to see them playing cricket together—Jacky about the height of his bat, and the two as grave as possible.

I said one day to Mrs. Des Vœux how much we liked Mr. Trefusis.

"John Trefusis is a good man, my dear," she said, "a good man, and one can't go beyond that. He has suffered a great deal, but I pray there may be happiness in store for him yet."

That first opened my eyes to the fact that Mr. Trefusis was in love with my sister. Indeed it was patent enough once we had the clue. But Freda—that was quite another matter. That she knew I could not doubt, from the little half-vexed consciousness she betrayed once or twice under his regard, but of love I could find no slightest sign.

One day Freda and I were together, and Freda's son was delivering his mind on many matters, as was his way when his commanding-officer was not present.

"Auntie Hilda," said he to me suddenly, "have you long, beautiful hair like mother's? And would you mind very much if I were playing with you and pulled it all down?"

"Of course she would mind," said Freda. "No lady likes to have a rowdy little boy like you pulling her all to pieces."

"'Cept you," said Jacky; "but then, of course, you're not a lady, you're only mother. You remember that day I had pulled down all your hair when Trefusis came in."

"Jacky!" said Freda, with a little blush of annoyance, "you are talking too much, and you know you must say *Mr. Trefusis*. I am always telling you so."

"I sha'n't," said Jacky flatly. "He calls me 'Shaver', and I call him Trefusis. We understand each other."

Freda's eyes twinkled. She was used to Jacky's insubordination with her, and I'm afraid rather condoned it.

"Well," said Jacky, embarking on his tale, "mother and I was playing at bears in the hall one wet morning. 'Cause it was so wet we didn't think anyone would come. Mother was going round on the floor growling, with all her hair down. I'd pulled it down in the bear's hug, and she wanted to put it up, but I said to her,—'I say, you leave it down 'cause I think it pretty', and so she left it."

"Oh, Jacky, Jacky, you silly boy!" cried Freda laughing.

"Well, all of a sudden I looked up," said Jacky, "and there was Trefusis in the doorway. 'Hello, Trefusis!' said I. But instead of saying 'Hello, Shaver!' he never said a word, but stood staring at mother. I s'pose he couldn't see her because her hair was all over her, or else he was 'mazed at her for playing bears. Then mother got up and just twisted her hair round anyway, and went out of the room, and didn't come back for a long time. And Trefusis stood staring at the door, till at last he 'membered me, and looked at me and said, 'Hello, Shaver!'

though it was quite hours since I'd said to him 'Hello, Trefusis!'"

"Jacky, Jacky!" cried Freda, "here comes Gran, and not a minute too soon. Do you think your Aunty Hilda wants to be bored by an egotistical little boy like you?"

Jacky was carried off incontinently to have a fresh toilet made—his toilet seemed always in need of readjustment—and after he had gone I turned and looked at Freda.

She looked back at me steadily, and again the wounded and angry flush, which I had seen once before, rose in her cheeks. Her foot tapped the ground impatiently.

"It would be a good thing for Jacky," I said wistfully, for I liked Mr. Trefusis.

"Never, Hilda, never!" said Freda. "How can you think of it, loving your husband as you do? The Hazel dines will take care of Jacky, but if they did not, I could still refuse him such a sacrifice as that. I will meet Jim with my marriage vow to him unbroken."

The tears flashed in her eyes as I bent to kiss her. Poor Mr. Trefusis!



CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RESTORATION OF BRANDON.

AFTER all, who do you think it was of all the Brandons that brought the fortune back to Brandon? You would never guess. Well, it was Aline, and now I will tell you how that came about.

During the months that elapsed between my marriage and the autumn when Mr. Desmond was expected to revisit the "old country", Hugh and Donald worked quietly but indefatigably to fit themselves for anything that might turn up in the life of a new continent. They were already expert riders, and could handle a gun, as they could an oar, with absolute dexterity. They had grown to be big, sunburnt, handsome lads in their free and wholesome life, and never knew an ache or a pain, so they were made of the fine raw stuff of pioneers. But in the last months, acting on my Lance's advice, they set themselves to learn the rough-and-ready rudiments of the simpler trades, to shoe a horse with Teddy Murphy at the forge, to cobble a shoe or mend a joint in a horse's harness with Farrell the brogue-maker and Byrne the harness-maker, and many such useful arts.

They were full of the joy of the new life that was

coming to them, scenting the battle of the world far off like the horse in the Scriptures, and yet preparing for it with a gravity and responsibility which came of their deep-rooted conviction that they were going to redeem Brandon. They had time now to make their own and their family's fortunes, now that the gray old wolf was no longer at Castle Angry waiting upon our need.

"If Sir Rupert had lived," Hugh said to me once, "one or other of us must have stayed to watch him, but now we shall go with minds at rest."

Poor Aline watched their quiet preparations with unprotesting pain. In her heart I think she was proud that they had asserted their manhood, though that heart bled all the time with fear of how that dragon, the world, might overcome them. We were always trying to console her, pointing out to her how this and that mother's son went and conquered and returned in safety.

"Ah!" she would say, "is it easier for me because other women suffer? I shall be glad when they return, but let me have my grief now that they must go."

Then the time came when we heard that Mr. Desmond had come back, and was staying in the Brandon Arms, as he had done six years ago before he took away our Pierce. And when we heard he was there Lance suggested that we should go and call on him and ask him to take up his quarters at Rose Hill, seeing that he had been Pierce's friend. Lance was keen also to see the man of whom he had heard so much, whose qualities of all others were those that appealed to him.

But when we arrived at the rough little place they call the Brandon Arms we found that Mr. Desmond had

gone out. As we turned away rather disappointed, the landlady, Mrs. Fahy, came hurrying after us.

"I think, ma'am," she said, "that Mr. Desmond may have gone to Brandon, for there was a boy here with a bit of a note from Miss Brandon herself in the morning, and when Mr. Desmond came in and read it he just ordered his chop and immediately after went out again. I shouldn't be surprised now if you were picking him up, if so be you took it into your head to walk towards Brandon."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Fahy," said I, "I think we shall."

And, sure enough, when we went into the drawing-room at Brandon there was the man himself sitting astride a spindle-legged chair, and talking earnestly with Aline.

They made a curious contrast, he with his big frame and rugged face, his great hands, with their look of grasp, resting on his knees, and his rough colonist's clothes, and she so fair and dainty and refined, with her almost old-world dignity. She was wearing a tea-gown which had been easily adapted from our great-grandmother's wardrobe, a brocade of the colour the French call ashes of roses, a queer, elegant, faded thing, with old lace at the neck and wrists. I saw at once that Aline had made a toilette for Mr. Desmond, and guessed at her tender reason. She did him so much honour in the hope that he would more surely be a friend to her boys.

As we came through the ante-room unannounced Mr. Desmond was speaking, and I signed to Lance not to disturb him till he had finished.



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"I CAN ONLY SAY, MISS BRANDON, THAT I LOVED THE LAD
LIKE A SON."

"I can only say, Miss Brandon, that I loved the lad like a son, and would have saved him from pain and trouble just as if he had been my son. But I have had a rough life, and did not know how to manage a lad like him when it came to a delicate matter. I can only say what a deep grief it has been to me."

"Oh, no, no!" said Aline with her handkerchief at her eyes. "He said that no one could have been more patient, more wise, and tender with him than you were. I can never thank you enough."

"I wish to Heaven I could have saved him," the man answered in his deep and musical voice.

Then we went in, and Aline introduced us to Mr. Desmond. He and Lance fraternized at once, if one can talk of fraternizing in a case like this, where my husband sat and looked at the elder man with a boyish expression of hero-worship on his face, and listened with such deference.

There was a curious nobility and simplicity about the man. Whatever his successes had been in the world, it was easy to see that they had not been obtained by craft and guile or by trampling on weaker men. Seeing that we were interested in what he had to tell he talked with simple unconsciousness fully and freely.

"Yes," he said in answer to Lance, "it is lonely to come back. There are nettles growing round the hearthstone of the little cabin where I was born, and the last of my kin is laid to rest long ago in Brandon Abbey. Still, the mountains and the woods are the same; it is the same country. I sat to-day for a long time on the stile where I used to sit when I fetched the water from the

well for my mother, and I remembered how, the day I was leaving her, she ran after me to the stile to kiss me again, for the last time it proved. Yes, it is lonely to come back, but the old memories are sweet too."

He said nothing at all of what we knew, how his wise and generous benefactions had made many a one rejoice at his coming back.

After a time Lance told him how we had looked for him at the Brandon Arms with the hope that he would come and stay with us at Rose Hill, but he declined, although very cordially.

"I never know when the fit will take me," he said laughing, "to roam about, and I should hopelessly disorganize your hours and your servants' ways. Besides, my old school-fellow, Mary Fahy, would take it as a slight upon her place if I were to desert her. Let me instead come in of evenings to smoke a pipe when I like, —may I? May I, Mrs. MacNeill?"

"Indeed you may," said I.

Just then the boys came in, full of repressed excitement. They shook hands with Mr. Desmond, and then retired into a distant corner, where they sat and glowered at their great man, in whose hands, although he did not yet know it, their fate lay. But he seemed almost as much interested in them as they were in him. His keen eyes followed them into their obscurity.

"Those great fellows," he said to Aline, "they were little lads when I was here before. Yet they were ready to follow me into the wilderness."

For a minute the silence was electrical. Then one or other of the boys broke silence.

"We are ready to follow you now."

Mr. Desmond stood up slowly, revealing his great height.

"What, still of the same mind?" he said. "Come over here till I look at you."

The boys came out of their corner and stood before him side by side, their eyes bright with excitement. The thing had come about much sooner than we expected, and as I turned to look at Aline I saw that her head was drooping, and her fingers plucked nervously at the lace of her gown.

Mr. Desmond looked at the boys a minute or two, and they looked back at him.

"Yes," he said, "I remember. You wanted to come with me, and I said that I had room for men, and that when you were men, if you were still of the same mind, I would find room for you."

"And now we are men," said Hugh, "and we are still of the same mind."

"We have been learning smith-work, and mason-work, and carpentry, and other things that we thought might be useful to us when you had found room for us," said Donald, "and we are ready to go."

"What, both?" said Mr. Desmond, and then he turned to Aline. "You would trust them to me, Miss Brandon?"

"Yes," said Aline in a low voice, "I have told them they might go if you would have them."

"Thank you!" he said, and his voice was full of feeling. We knew he felt that she had trusted him with Pierce, and Pierce had come home only to die, and now she trusted him with those two.

"Thank you!" he said again. "God helping me, I will fulfil your trust."

After that we saw a great deal of Mr. Desmond, and he was often at Brandon. There were naturally many arrangements to be made about the boys, and Aline confessed to me that Mr. Desmond's affection for Pierce and grief for his death had brought the silent strong man of the people closer into her friendship than perhaps any man had ever penetrated before.

He was to leave in October, and the boys' simple outfits were ready, and we had begun to dread the coming parting, for Aline more than for ourselves. It was no unusual thing now to find Mr. Desmond at Brandon when we went over of an afternoon, so that when we went in one of those last evenings, and saw him standing by the mantel-piece looking down at Aline's bent head, and Aline visibly agitated, we felt no surprise. The air was surcharged with emotion just then.

We sat down, and made some ordinary remarks, and then I asked if it had been settled about the date of departure, a matter which had been still under discussion when last we had met.

"Mrs. MacNeill," Mr. Desmond answered me in a half-shy, half-humorous way, "it is possible that the sailing may be indefinitely postponed after all."

"What do you mean?" I cried, without a glimmer of the truth.

He bent and lifted Aline's hand and kissed it.

"Your sister has done me the immense honour," he said, "of consenting to be my wife."

Well, we were all delighted beyond measure—all but

the boys, who were bitterly disappointed at being cheated out of their fortune-hunting, so disappointed, indeed, that Mr. Desmond at last persuaded Aline to consent to their going out to the charge of his lieutenant, Mr. Allen, whom he trusted entirely, for such time as they chose to stay.

“If they have the spirit of the thing, they will be happy nowhere else. If not, it will take the edge of the appetite off, and they can come back to any career they choose, that I can open for them.”

So Aline was married—by poor, faithful Mr. Benson, who had the sympathy of us all—and the boys went. A year later Hugh returned, but Donald stayed where he was. He is in Cape Town now, managing that part of John Desmond’s immense business, and next year he will be in London, so that you may say we will all be reunited again. Hugh entered Sandhurst, and is now a very handsome young soldier, much in love with his profession.

But as soon as Aline and he had settled down after their marriage Mr. Desmond set about restoring the ancient glories of Brandon. Bit by bit, and with the utmost reverence, the dear old house was restored, and made more beautiful than our wildest dreams could have imagined.

Aline is now quite a great lady, much sought after in Society, beside whom her younger sisters are quite humble folk. But more than that, she is a happy and proud woman, and as for the good she and John Desmond do unostentatiously, that is written in the hearts of the poor, and in the books of Heaven.

The twins, by the way, were of the *débutantes* this year, and are counted among the beauties of the Season. But I don't think admiration or newspaper paragraphs will make them vain or worldly, for have they not been brought up by Aline, who, like a certain royal saint, goes splendidly to honour her husband's position, but directs the eyes of her most meek spirit ever towards the Kingdom of Heaven.

THE END.

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